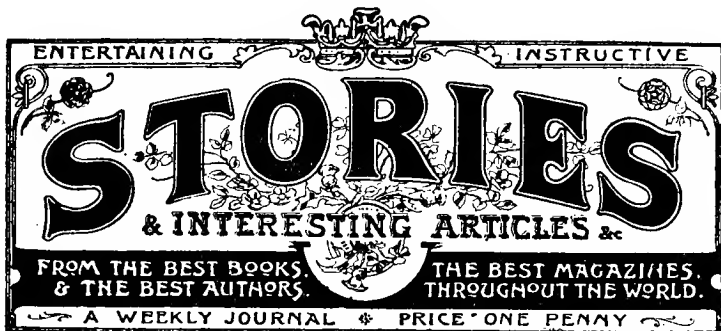


THE POSTMASTER OF MARKET DEIGNTON

B PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM





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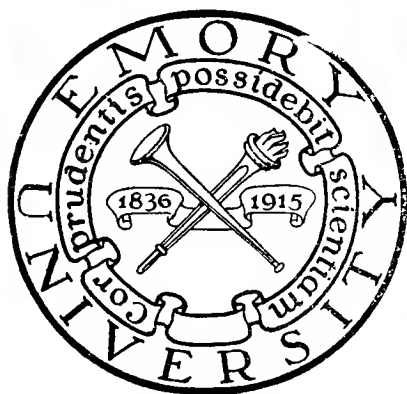
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THE POSTMASTER
OF MARKET DEIGNTON

THE POSTMASTER OF MARKET DEIGTON

BY

B. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

AUTHOR OF

'A DAUGHTER OF THE MARIONIS,' 'THE MODERN PROMETHEUS,'
'THE WORLD'S GREAT SNARE, ETC.

LONDON

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS, LIMITED

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THE POSTMASTER OF MARKET DEIGNTON.



INTRODUCTION.

‘ IF you please, sir !’

‘ What is it, Morton ?’

‘ There are several patients in the waiting-room, and your appointment with Sir Charles is for half-past one. If any more arrive, I think I had better ask them to come to-morrow.’

‘ Not to-morrow. Thursday, Morton. I expect to be away all day to-morrow. Dr. Stewart will relieve me, and you must go to him if there is anything special.’

‘ Very good, sir.’

The assistant withdraws, and the physician returns to his labours. Four more patients in turn occupy that low easy-chair, drawn so that the light from the high windows shall fall as far as possible upon their faces. The physician who listens to the recital of their symptoms, checking them but rarely to ask a few terse questions, sits back in the shadows, his

perfectly impassive features and tone thrown into strong relief by the nervousness of the men and women who have come to consult him. In one or two cases he makes a brief examination, and notes the result with a few careless dashes of his pen.

One by one they enter and pass out, unconsciously typifying in their entrances and exits the whole range of human drama. There is one who passes out with a dull pain at the heart-strings and eyes suddenly blurred. No need to ask his sentence! Others find their way out into the street with lightened eyes and hearts suddenly freed from a great load. Their fate or their reprieve is spoken in a few words and in the same tone.

The physician whose counsel they have come to seek is, for a young man, marvellously hardened in his profession, but to-day his stoicism is something more than normal. The patients who have come and gone have seemed to him like moving figures in a curious dream. Behind the mask of set-calm features and stern self-repression smoulders a very furnace of unrest.

They are all gone. As the door closes upon the last, he leans back in his chair with a little gesture of relief. It is like the withdrawal of an iron band. The routine of the morning is over; his brain no longer has any need of its enforced labours. His thoughts are his own.

Gradually the physician falls away, and the man steals out. A tinge of colour usurps the studious pallor of his cheeks, and his deep-set eyes are suddenly bright. He has unlocked a drawer, and a

letter and a photograph lie before him. The letter is from a man, but the photograph is of a woman.

He reads the former before he glances at the latter—reads it slowly and with knitted brows, as though he expects to find in it something more than appears upon the surface. Yet a simpler or more straightforward letter could scarcely have been written.

‘DEIGHTON COURT,
‘*Monday.*

‘MY DEAR NORMAN,

‘Mine old enemy has come upon me like a thief in the dark, and unless you can leave town to-morrow, I must needs hand over my carcass to the village practitioner here, which God forbid! Come to-morrow by the four o’clock train, and bring your gun; you must spare just an hour or two on Wednesday to try your luck with my birds. The best of the covers have not been touched yet, and there is not a man here who can shoot a little bit, so you will have it all your own way.

‘Don’t fail me, there’s a good fellow! You have never been to Deighton, I believe, and I shall enjoy showing it to you.

‘My lady bids me say that she adds her commands to my request! I will send to meet the four o’clock train, or any other more convenient to you, if you will wire.

‘Yours in pain,

‘HUMPHREY DEIGHTON.

‘P.S.—It is in the great toe.’

The letter is carefully read, and then pushed aside with a sudden gesture of impatience. For a moment he sits irresolute, then, taking a bunch of keys from his pocket, he unlocks the top drawer on the left-hand side of his cabinet, and from underneath a pile of loose papers draws out a small ivory casket, curiously carved and fastened with a silver padlock. His fingers toy nervously with it for a moment, and then the lid flies open, and a curious faint fragrance steals out into the sombre room. The casket is full of letters in the same handwriting. The one on the top, presumably the latest addition to the pile, he takes out and reads. It bears the same date and heading as the note which he has just discarded :

‘DEIGNTON COURT,
‘*Monday.*

‘By this post Sir Humphrey, I am thankful to say, is sending for you professionally. You would not believe, my dear Norman, how long these few days have seemed without even a glimpse of you, or any other civilized person. The country at this time of the year is something horrible. Let nothing stand in the way of your coming, I implore you ! Never mind if all your best patients die ! I, too, shall feel like that unless you come, and I am—well, more than a patient, am I not ?

‘There is nothing to tell you. This place is deadly dull, and I could not hope to make you understand how much I miss—London ! Each day, at five, I have thought of you ; yesterday I closed my eyes and

almost fancied that I heard your horses in the avenue, and your feet upon the stairs. To-morrow it will be better than that : I shall see you and have you here. *Vive to-morrow!* Look out for a line from me in your room, if I do not see you immediately upon your arrival.

‘ Always yours,
‘ CORA.’

Word for word he reads it through, and the faint flush in his cheeks grows gradually deeper and deeper. At the end he makes a sudden impulsive gesture, as though to crumple it up in his hand and cast it from him—an impulse which seems to die away almost as swiftly as it came. How could he ever have dreamed of such sacrilege! With firm fingers he replaces the letter in the box, and turns the key.

Then, after a moment's irresolution, he crosses the room and stands before the window, looking out across the large, dingy square, with a curiously absent gleam in his dark eyes. Something in those few feminine sentences written in bold, distinct characters across the daintiest cream paper seems to stand out like fire before him. They force him to realize what he has kept zealously in the background. There is no longer any possibility of concealment, of self-deception. He is face to face now with that fight which, since the world began, men have fought, and, alas! most often lost. His fixed eyes see nothing of the gray, smoke-begrimed sky, or the bare trees which wave their branches before the window. He

looks beyond: down, down into the depths of the precipice which yawns before him, the precipice of guilt, of sin, of shame. There are voices in his ears which have been dead for awhile, voices whose counsel has ever been for his good, and which come back to him now laden with many heart-stirring memories. They will be heard; he must perforce listen to them. What is it they are saying? Dishonour, self-abasement, self-contempt! Bad words; an evil state! Yet, how fair she is, and how strong the web which she has woven! As yet the bonds are of gossamer. Some day, the voice whispers, they may be of iron—iron which eats into the soul, and which no human strength can rend apart.

It is so simple, and yet so terrible. The avenues of history since the world began are thronged with ghostly warnings. And he, too, this tall, stern young physician, he too is in the toils; and the chains, which as yet have been roses, are beginning to savour of the metal. It is within his power to cast them off or to rivet them for ever, to seal them with the signet of his own dishonour, or to burst them aside and see no more the woman whose light hand has forged them. He is at the parting of the ways, and the voices in his ears will make themselves heard. To see her no more! Yes; he could do it, he is strong enough. There is fibre enough in his being to make the strain no impossibility. Only it seems to him, as he gazes out into the gray twilight of the early afternoon, that if he should do so, if he should pluck out this evil flower and cast it away, much, if

not all, that is sweet to him in life must be rooted up also. It is like choosing to live for ever in the deep shadows where the sunlight may never fall. And, after all, why should he? Right and wrong, honour and dishonour, what are they but abstract states, the creation of an arbitrary code of laws? What will he be the better for following their dictates? His, at any rate, will be the loss. Whose will be the profit?

He raises himself with a conscious effort from the slough of metaphysics which has been closing in around him. For awhile his mind moves in a healthier groove. From outside people now and then glance curiously in at the tall figure standing so rigidly before the high window. But he is at no time conscious of their notice. To him it is as though he were for the time removed from the ordinary channels of life, and rendered unconscious of its incidents. He is developing his part in that silent drama in which she and he are the solitary figures. In those few minutes of bitter and uncertain mind, it seems to him that he is shaping the fortunes of two lives.

What is it that helps him to come to that stern, sweeping decision, which from the moment even of its conception seems to remove him so far from all his past life? Is it ambition, self-respect, honour? Or is it that what has seemed love to him is, after all, counterfeit, a thing of sham, to which he has been the more subject from the hard, practical side of his professional life? It is a question which then, at any

rate, he does not ask himself. But when at last he is disturbed by the sound of his waiting horses pawing the ground outside in the street, his decision is finally taken. The coffer lies empty upon his table, and its contents are a little mass of fluttering ashes upon the grate.

A few minutes afterwards he is being whirled westwards on an errand of life and death. Then follows the routine work at the hospitals, where the nurses whisper his name respectfully, and the patients follow him with their eyes and half raise themselves to look at him as he passes down the broad avenue between them. Finally, when his day's work is over, he is driven rapidly to Waterloo, barely in time to catch the train for Market Deignton.

* * * * *

It is dawn when he returns. The square is empty, and the tall, gray houses are gaunt and lifeless. He crosses the street and unlocks the door unnoticed. Even the policeman dozing at the corner has not seen him, and his step in the hall and on the stairs is too light to wake the servants sleeping at the back of the house. Perhaps it is as well. There is a lead-coloured shade in his face, and dark lines under his eyes which he may not wish to be made the gossip of servants' tongues. He is in need of sleep and quiet, and he goes softly to his bedroom. Strange events have happened within these last few hours, stranger events even than he knows of.

There is not a soul to warn him. All London is sleeping, unconscious of the trembling wires which

are flashing terrible messages over their housetops—news which will soon become the theme for millions of men's tongues. The last sensation is eight days old. Away with it! It is dull and stale in comparison with this morning's news. Already the great machinery is whirling the story on to the morning papers. In a few hours they will be in the hands of the hordes of City men on the railroads, the 'buses, and in the streets. Is there none to warn you, Norman Scott? It is your name there in print which men and women are handling lightly, your fair fame and honour—ay, and more than that—which the world is commencing to smirch and daub with gruesome colours! See, the sun is steadily rising higher in the heavens; the morning is growing apace; the clamour of men's tongues is becoming louder and louder. The sunlight lies across the rush matting of your bed-chamber; it is stealing up the counterpane to your wan face. Awake, Norman Scott, awake! Every hour of sleep adds to your peril! Awake, and find yourself—if not famous, at least notorious!

CHAPTER I.

JOHN MARTIN, POSTMASTER AND CHEMIST.

IT is market-day in the little county town which has become my temporary abode. Out in the cobble-paved, straggling square are half a dozen stalls laden with prints and calicoes, cheap hats, fruit, picture-

books, legs of mutton, sides of beef, and many other such uninteresting articles. There seems to be plenty of everything except customers, and they are scarcely expected yet. The housewives of the place are still busy with their week-end's cleaning, and their lords and masters are away toiling on the land. Later on, when the day's work is over and the oil-lamps are lit, they will come out together to make their little purchases, dressed most likely in their Sunday clothes, and washed to a degree of shininess which, until I came to Market Deignton, I should have thought incredible.

At present most of the stall-holders are engaged displaying their goods, the larger portion of which, by-the-bye, are carried out from the little shops which front the market-place. Strangers are not much fancied at this sleepy, old-world town. It is my friend Mr. Holmes, the linen-draper, who is hanging up a row of felt hats above that wonderful pile of calicoes and cheap sateens, and my worthy friend Mr. Smith, the greengrocer, is likewise engaged in transferring his stock of cabbages, potatoes, and apples to the stall in front of his shop.

Butchering seems to be a more regular business, for Mr. Mann and his stalwart apprentice woke me up in the gray hours of the morning, flinging down great joints of beef and mutton upon his deal counter, and two hours ago he was sitting on his stool with last week's *Chronicle* in his hand, prepared for anything that might turn up in the shape of stray custom. He is a harmless-looking old man, notwithstanding

.

his blue smock and the shining steel which hangs by his side, but he is an inveterate gossip, as I have cause to know.

At the north end of the market-place there are half a dozen pens, from which arises a continual baaing, varying in key, but uniform in monotony. Things up there are a shade more lively. Mr. Foulds, the agent to the Deignton estate, has just ridden in, and with his riding-whip in his hand is looking over the stock of sheep. A couple of farmers stand by his side, and one or two villainous-looking cattle-drovers are listening to the words of the county oracle at a respectful distance. So far as I can judge, his remarks are disparaging in tone and disrespectful to the sheep generally. I may be wrong, of course; I only go by the fact that Farmer Harrison has taken off his broad-brimmed hat, and is scratching his head, a little habit he has when bereft of words or when things go wrong. I had an idea, when those sheep went by as I sat at breakfast this morning, that they were a weedy lot. Not that I knew anything about sheep; drugs and postage-stamps are my articles of merchandise; that is to say, I hold the proud position of village postmaster and chemist.

Across the market-place from my shop-door to the gateway of the Deignton Arms Inn is exactly ninety-two yards. The view is obstructed a little by a barn-like building of gray stone, built in early days for a market-house, but used now as a storehouse for corn and a repository for the market stalls and pens. However, by going to the extreme corner of my

sitting-room window and peering over the wire blind, I can just see the sign. A little corn business is done here to-day, and at twelve o'clock there will be a farmers' dinner, which my neighbours, Mr. Mann and Mr. Holmes, sometimes attend. Mr. Foulds will take the chair, and towards the close of the repast he will order in a bottle of wine, and various healths will be drunk. At the risk of being thought unsociable, I have hitherto declined to take my chair there, but to-day I have half made up my mind to go. We shall see.

I have said that I am the village postmaster and chemist of Market Deignton ; let me add a few more brief remarks concerning myself. First, as to my person. I am tall, although my shoulders have a most unbecoming stoop. I have a red-brown beard streaked with gray, and I wear large and disfiguring glasses. Personally, that disposes of me. I have been at Market Deignton about six months, and I can read men and their ways sufficiently well to tell you exactly in what esteem I am held amongst the village folk. I am considered odd, and blamed a little for my retiring ways ; but, on the whole, I have been labelled 'harmless,' and I do not think that I am disliked. Of my skill in medicine people have an exaggerated idea, and of my book-learning they speak with unmerited respect. They would prefer a gossip in my place, but, having me, they are good-humouredly inclined to make the best of it. I have a housekeeper, Mrs. Mason by name, who comes in to clean and to get my meals ; I have also an assistant,

David Holmes, the linen-draper's second son. They neither of them sleep in the house, and, save for them, I dwell alone.

One word more. I have spoken of Market Deighton as a village, and of its people as village folk. I beg its pardon. It is a town. Henceforth I hope to style it correctly.

To return to Saturday morning, the point at which I have chosen to take up this narrative. My sitting-room is not behind the shop, but alongside it, fronting the street, and from behind its wire blind I can see across the whole of the market-place. At a quarter-past eleven precisely I am standing up with my hands in my pocket, looking out and lazily wondering whether Mr. Foulds will buy those sheep after all. I am not particularly interested in the matter, and my speculation is of the very mildest order. I am simply standing there and using my thoughts in that manner because I have for the moment nothing better to do with them or with myself.

Suddenly I see signs of a commotion. Something is about to happen. The quiet dulness of the long summer morning is going to receive a fillip. Mr. Foulds and his farmer friends hold their hats in their hands, and the cattle-drovers are looking hopelessly about for some further means to express their abject humility. Mr. Holmes is out on the pavement with a pen behind his ear, and there are a score of feminine heads thrust out from the upper-story windows of the quaint gray stone houses which fringe the market. The children are all running toward

the north end of the square, and the heads are all—mine included—turned that way. Ah! this is something worth seeing. No wonder everyone has stopped to look. An open carriage—a barouche, I think it is called—with a pair of magnificent dark-bay horses, and a coat of arms upon the panel, servants all in mourning, and the horses with black rosettes. What can it be, I wonder? A lady inside alone—a lady dressed in half-mourning, leaning back amongst the cushions, and smiling graciously upon the little group of bare-headed men gathered around the sheep-pen. The carriage stops for a moment whilst Mr. Foulds, hat in hand, says a word or two and then falls back. Who can it be? How foolish I am! The carriage has turned in at the gateway of the Deignton Arms now, and I have seen nothing of her face because of this absurd ridiculous dimness of the eyes and unsteadiness. What is the matter with you, John Martin? Bah! I must be a little bilious, or out of sorts, somehow. David shall prescribe for me. David shall give me a draught. Now I think of it, I had very little sleep last night. David shall certainly make me up a draught. I will go and tell him.

I ought to be in the shop attending to business; but here I am at the window again, wasting my time. It seems to have an odd sort of attraction for me to-day. I know that Mr. Jones will not feel the same confidence in that cough medicine now that I have left David to mix it, and I know that there is a telegram lying upon my desk which I ought to despatch.

And yet here I am, with my hands in my pocket, and without the shadow of an excuse for my laziness. There is not even the excuse of there being anything to see. The carriage with its prancing horses and solitary occupant has disappeared. Mr. Foulds and the farmers seem to have come to terms, for they have left off prodding those miserable sheep about at last, and have turned away towards the inn. I wonder who that woman was inside the carriage? I wonder—— Oh, my God!

I call myself a strong man; but my cheeks are pale, and that beat of the heart is scarcely normal. My fingers are clutching at the window-sill, and my eyes—unspectacled, too!—are riveted upon that tall figure picking her way across the cobbled market-place straight—straight, by all that is horrible, by all that is bewildering!—to my shop.

It is over. Just a passing spasm. The weather has been a little trying lately, and I need exercise. My spectacles are on again, and my cheeks are regaining their usual colour. The attack was very brief. I am quite composed enough to study and admire the lady who seems about to honour my establishment with a visit.

She is no ordinary woman, this. See how regular, almost classical, are her cleanly-cut features, so regular and so pale her cheeks that her face would be cold save for the soft mobile mouth and gray-green eyes. See how she carries herself, too. She is an aristocrat, and she shows it. Watch the poise of her head, and the gracious but amply condescending

smile with which she acknowledges the bows and bobs and courtesies which obtrude themselves upon her. She is close to the pavement now, and is raising her skirt with a slight graceful movement as she steps up on to the flags. By-the-bye, is she so very young after all? I am inclined to think not. See that line across the forehead, and level with her lips. She is older than she seems, but she is beautiful. Not a girl's beauty by any means—too sad, too deep engrained, too listless. But I am mad to linger here, staring at this woman like a moon-struck youth. What is her beauty to me? What concern can it be of mine? Far more to the purpose is it that she is on the point of entering my shop, and I do not think that I should care about waiting upon her. David shall have the pleasure. David will gape at her, and he will be very nervous, but no doubt he will be able to retain enough of his wits to find out what she wants.

I fling open the door separating my sitting-room from the shop.

‘David!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I am particularly engaged, mixing drugs. Take the keys.’

I fling them on the counter, and close the door quickly. David will have something to say about this later on, I know. Stamps are my department, and he is not allowed to interfere with the post-office work. Never mind! Better David's gossip than the other.

I have my reasons for not going in to this particular customer. What they are is of no consequence. I am a plain man, my description of myself is only a few pages back, and perhaps I am shy of exhibiting my ugliness before so beautiful a woman. There are a host of possible reasons; any one of them will do. But, all the same, I have a sort of curiosity to hear her voice. In order to do so, I must confess that I stand up behind the door and listen. Why not? It is my own shop, and I am my own master.

I hold my breath and wait. There is the jingle of a little bell as the door is pushed open and she enters, a rustle of silken draperies, and a moment's silence. Then a slow, proud voice, tempered with a moderate amount of graciousness. What is the matter with my pulses, I wonder? I must certainly not forget that draught.

'Oh, good-morning, David! David Holmes, isn't it?'

'Yes, your ladyship. Good-morning, your ladyship.'

David went, or had been, to a class—a Sunday-school class, I think—at Deighton Court. I remember his telling me about it, or his mother or someone.

'Won't your ladyship have a chair? Not that one, please; it only has three legs, and it rattles. This one's all right.'

'Thank you!'

A moment's pause, and the sound of my cane chair being moved across the stone floor. Then her voice.

‘Will you give me ten shillings’ worth of stamps?’

A jingling of keys, David counting softly to himself, and the rattle of a small gold piece upon the counter. Then her voice :

‘I want to send a telegram. Where are your forms?—and a pencil, please.’

This is horrible! I alone can work the instrument. After all, I must go out and face her.

‘I will fetch Mr. Martin, your ladyship,’ David says, and prepares to come to me.

‘How do you get on with your new master?’ she asks indifferently.

‘Pretty well, thank you, your ladyship,’ he answers. ‘People call him queer, but I like him better than Mr. Ashton. He isn’t always nagging one so.’

She does not answer, her interest in the subject being evidently exhausted, and David comes to me. I am trying on my thickest spectacles.

‘A telegram, sir. It’s Lady Deignton, sir. She wants to send a telegram.’

‘I’m coming directly, David.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘My eyes are painful to-day, and I cannot bear the light. Pull down the shop blind.’

He hurries out, and I hear the brown holland blind go down with a rattle. Then I follow him with a bundle of telegraph forms in my hand, which I lay out on the counter before her, and pass on to the instrument. Here I am enclosed in a little mahogany stand with wings, and, unseen myself, can steal a glance at her through the glass.

Ah! she is not writing at all. She is sitting with the pencil in her hand, watching me. I feel a cold shiver travelling upwards through my whole frame. Yet I do not move.

At last she has looked away. She is writing now; evidently she does not find it an easy task. She tears up one form and begins another. I watch her all the time, unseen. I was dreaming when I talked of a girl's face just now. It must have been a vision. This is a woman's, and a sad woman's.

At last she has finished, and is standing up, holding out two telegrams. I go towards her mechanically, holding out my hand for them. As I take them from her she glances up at me and gives a little subdued cry.

I look her in the face mildly, questioningly. I am the new postmaster, and she is the great lady of the place, but hitherto a stranger to me. Her expression is a little curious; I cannot interpret it; I can only discover its principal component. It is fear—breathless, wrapt fear. But my steady, bland gaze does its work.

'I beg your pardon,' she says slowly, her voice a little troubled still. 'Your face startled me for the moment. It is a curious reminder of someone I once knew.'

I bow, anxious, if possible, to avoid speech, and calmly adding up the words on the telegrams, hand her the stamps. She affixes them, still watching me half carelessly, half anxiously.

'You can read them?'

I take up a pencil, and read the top one through without a falter.

'To Miss Deignton, care of Mrs. Wortley-Denoble, Denoble Manor, near Exeter.

'You must please do as I desire. Have thought over your request, and reply finally, you must not come.'

I put it on one side and read the second one. Lady Deignton leans a little over the counter, and, beneath an affectation of carelessness, honours me with a very keen scrutiny.

'To John W. Gay, Enquiry Agent, 10, Parliament Street, London, W.

'Report immediately address of Dr. Norman Scott. Wire reply, if possible.

'DEIGNTON.'

'Is that right?' I ask, idly tapping with my pencil upon the counter.

She puts down the money with a brief assent and rises. I have gained the shelter of my desk, and I can see that she is still looking pale and shaken. I wish that she would go. There is a light in her eyes as of coming trouble.

A rustle of silk skirts and dainty draperies gathered up into her well-gloved hand as she moves across the dusty shop floor. On the threshold a brief *'Good-morning'* to David, who is holding the little half-door open for her, and then—thank Heaven!—she is gone. How dark and cold my little shop seems! Never mind: she is gone.

‘Pull up the blind, David ; my eyes are better now.’

He obeys me, and the sunshine streams in once more. I stand and watch her out of sight with a curious tightening of my heart-strings. Then I turn to the telegrams and commence to despatch them.

The one to John W. Gay I despatch first. Then I commence with the other.

‘To Miss Deighton, care of Mrs. Wortley-Denoble,
Denoble Manor, near Exeter.

‘You must please do as I desire. Have thought over your request, and reply finally——’

Here I hesitate. The quick clicking of the instrument ceases, and I look across the little market-place with far-away eyes and bent brows. My resolution is soon taken ; I continue my task :

‘you must come.

‘DEIGHTON.’

Only one word omitted. So simple an error ; it might happen any day at any telegraph-office. But I go back to my little room and sit there alone with locked door—alone, save for a chamber full of ghosts. My brain is busy weaving out the next scene in the drama of my little life. What a medley it all is ! Pale-faced figures and voices raised in agony, soft whisperings and the gleam of brilliant eyes, the snapping of golden cords, and the dull cold burning of that despair which eats away the heart and loosens all the strings of life. What a tangled web it all is, woven across my dizzy memory—tangled and confused, yet thrown into some semblance of order by

the thunderclap of tragedy. Away into the background with it all! For me memory and madness must move hand in hand. Let me push this giddy weight away. Let me fix my mind upon two things only. First, that I am John Martin, postmaster of Market Deignton. Secondly, that to-day I have taken the first step toward that dim circle of hope which throws a faint, far-away light upon the horizon of my life.

CHAPTER II.

A VISITOR.

AT eight o'clock precisely, following in the footsteps of my predecessors, I close the shop. For the last half an hour Market Deignton has been in an unheard-of state of excitement, and David's hands have been itching for the shutters. There is a concert in the large room behind the inn—an amateur concert for the benefit of the Infirmary, of which her ladyship is the patroness. Carriages have been rolling in by the score, carriages disclosing to the open-mouthed market throng fine ladies in snowy-white opera cloaks, and men in evening clothes. The front seats are half a guinea each, and the high prices and Lady Deignton's patronage have made the affair fashionable. It is her ladyship's first appearance after nearly two years' mourning, and for the last week or two everyone has been saying 'How sweet it is of dear Lady Deignton to abandon her own

desire for a longer period of seclusion, and ensure success for the concert by her promise to attend.' I have had the privilege of disposing of a good many tickets, and the lady who brought them to me, and who was surprised when I growled at her for offering me a commission, was good enough to suggest my retaining a two-shilling one for myself. I threw it to David, and since then the boy has scarcely been sane.

His time has come at last. The mail-bag, sealed with my own hand, has been called for a few minutes before the hour, and at the first stroke of the church clock David is out with the shutters. In the little sitting-room, to which I retire with a sigh of relief, I find my evening meal prepared for me, and I settle down to enjoy the only part of the day which reconciles me to existence.

My supper itself—I dare not call it dinner, though such it really is—could not by any possible stretch of the imagination be called luxurious. As a rule, I hurry through it, for Mrs. Mason, who 'does for me,' is waiting in the kitchen to clear away, and to get rid of her quickly and have the place to myself is usually my chief desire. To-night I have but little appetite. An indifferently cooked chop and a glass of thin claret are despatched in little more than ten minutes, and in another ten I lock the door upon Mrs. Mason. Then, hey presto! for a transformation scene. For four long hours at least, often six, I am the village post-master no longer. Out comes a tin of finely-scented rich brown mocha, and a wonderful machine imported

from Paris, in which long practice has taught me how to brew to perfection my favourite beverage. Whilst it is steaming and bubbling in a great glass bowl, I bring out from the same carefully locked cupboard an ivory jar lined with lead, which, being decapitated, discloses a cunning mixture of honeydew and caven-dish ; and from the shelf at the back comes a deep-coloured meerschaum, which I fill with loving fingers. An old red chintz arm-chair, high-backed, and with many gaps in its ancient covering, is drawn up to the fire. Hiss goes the coffee, emptying itself with a succession of gulps pleasant to my ears from one glass bowl to the other. While it clears, I bring out an old blue Worcester cup and saucer, and my one silver teaspoon.

My preparations for the evening have now reached their final stage, and it only remains for me to decide of what world I shall choose to become a temporary inhabitant. My bookcases are only of painted deal, but they surround the little room, and they are tolerably well filled. Fortunately for me, no one in Market Deignton has the faintest idea as to the value of those rows of dingy calf-bound volumes, or my reputation for common-sense would certainly suffer. As it is, every now and then, generally before quarter day, a small parcel, addressed with most unwilling hand, goes up to Sotheby's, and a cheque reaches me by return of post. Then for a week I am a morose and miserable man. I try to hide the gaps made by their loss, but it is always in vain. The gap seems to be not only in my bookcases : I have lost friends—

friends who have been faithful to me, and my heart aches for them.

To-night I am in no studious mood. I want to escape from myself and from Market Deignton by the easiest possible channel.

I pass over a grim-looking Kant with whom I have spent my last few evenings, and take out De Quincey and an odd volume of Voltaire. Then I pass straight to my poetry shelf and select a small morocco bound 'Maud,' much the worse for wear, a Byron, Keats, and Shelley. I lay the latter down on a footstool by the side of my chair, and after a moment's hesitation retain 'Maud.' Then I pour out my coffee, light my pipe, and down I sink amongst those creaking but easy springs, puffing out volumes of smoke into the room, and with my heart already beating to the music of those long passionate stanzas.

It is very seldom that I am interrupted, very seldom that my feet touch once more the solid earth until either chilliness or sleepiness induce me to glance from the handful of dead ashes on the hearth—for my supply of coal is limited—to the little clock on the mantel-piece, and I remember that I am the post-master of Market Deignton, and that I must be up to receive the mail-bag at seven o'clock in the morning. Now and then there is a ring at the shop-bell, and I have to grope my way there through the darkness, to admit some anxious messenger, generally a child, and dispense a simple prescription. That is but seldom, though. People are rarely ill at Market

Deignton, and when they die it is generally from old age.

But to-night I am scarcely in the middle of my first pipe when an unheard-of thing happens. I sit up with a start, and wonder whether I have been dreaming. No ; there it is again ! A soft, yet impatient knocking at my sitting-room door, which opens in the old-fashioned way upon the street.

I lay down my pipe, and with my book still in my hand, walk frowning across the room. There is nothing in my surroundings particularly sybaritical, and yet I have all a shy man's reluctance to expose my tastes and manner of life to the gossips of the place. Hitherto I have kept free from visitors after shop-hours. Some trifling hospitalities offered on my first arrival by Mr. Mann and Mr. Holmes I declined as kindly as possible, but firmly. People have seemed content to take me as I wished to be taken—as a man harmless and unassuming, yet desirous of living his life to himself. So far, I have been able to offend no one, and yet I have my own way. And now, on this night of all others, when every man, woman, and child who has sixpence to spend for a back seat has gone to gape upon his betters, there must come this confounded knocking ! Shall I open the door at all ? Perhaps the person will go away if I keep still.

Vain hope ! Another knock—a little less soft now and more imperative. I must accept the inevitable. I lift the latch, and gaze out into the street.

CHAPTER III.

WHITE ROSES AND ASHES.

THE open doorway frames a strange picture—a picture on which I gaze with blank astonishment. There is a section of deep-blue sky lit with stars, the opposite house gable very clear in the bright moonlight, and in the foreground a tall woman, wrapped from head to foot in a soft gray opera-cloak, with a hood drawn closely over her head.

‘Let me come in!’ she demands impatiently—‘quick!’

I am amazed, but I stand aside, and she steps in with the old impetuous grace which I know so well. It is she who closes the door. Something in her voice and sudden appearance has struck me powerless, and I am holding on to a chair-back, watching her, dumb and motionless. The door is closed and locked; then she throws off her heavy cloak, which falls unheeded across my table, and holds out her pearl-gloved hands towards me.

Bah! I have fallen asleep over my book! I am dreaming—dreaming once more of the folly of those old days before their sweetness turned into dust and ashes. Dreaming! How the room spins round with me! How my heart leaps! Dreaming once more of her, once more of those wonderful flashing eyes!—heavens! how distinct they are—of that glorious chestnut hair, of that delicate, quivering mouth! Once more of you, Cora! To-night! Ah, how real

it all seems to-night ! When have I seen that ivory-gray satin dress with the low corsage, and that great bunch of roses ? Never before, I think. Yet I see your bosom rising and falling ; the perfume of your roses fills the room ; the light of your eyes is shining down into the dark corners of my heart ! Ah, how sweet a dream ! how bitter will be the awakening !

‘ Norman, have I frightened you ? Are you not glad to see me ? ’

Am I mad ? If so, God keep me mad a little longer ! My pulses are beating wildly. It was her voice—I swear it was her voice ! I am awake.

‘ Speak to me, Norman ! ’

Once and for ever the spell is broken. I look across my little table away into the past, and I know with a sudden rush of relief that all desire to bridge over that dark gulf is dead and gone. I take off my glasses, and look steadily into this woman’s face with a slight frown darkening my own.

‘ You have found me out, then,’ I say slowly. ‘ You knew me this morning.’

She, too, has drawn herself up—a gloriously beautiful woman—and looks at me with the old curious light in her eyes, and a familiar smile, half mocking, half seductive, twitching at the corners of her lips. The old magnificent composure has asserted itself. She is as much at her ease as though she were paying an ordinary afternoon call.

‘ Yes, I have found you out, Sir Hermit. Your disguise was fairly good, but not good enough to deceive a woman, especially me ! May I sit down in

your easy-chair, please, and warm my feet?—satin slippers are a trifle chilly to-night.'

She does not wait for my consent. She sits down and rests her feet upon my fender without a shade of embarrassment. Then she looks searchingly and deliberately around at all my belongings, and ends by beckoning me to her side.

'My poor dear boy,' she whispers caressingly, 'come and kneel down on the hearthrug here. I want to talk to you.'

I move over towards her, but I keep my eyes averted; her hand rests passively upon mine.

'How you must have suffered!' she exclaims with a little gulp in her throat. 'Tell me all about it.'

I look her steadily in the face. 'Yes, I have suffered,' I answer slowly; 'you can see that. Tell me, do you think that I have deserved this? I am curious to know. Often I have wondered whether I should ever find myself face to face with you once more, and ask you this question.'

I keep my eyes riveted upon her, but I cannot read her expression. It is at once plaintive and sympathetic, anxious, and—yes!—loving. How far is she acting? How much of the real woman can I see? Alas! I cannot tell. I am utterly disappointed.

'Norman, I cannot believe it!' she answers slowly, looking away from me into the fire. 'I cannot believe it. I do not care to think of it at all. It is like looking into a blank wall.'

There is utter silence between us. She sits idly gazing into my dying fire, as though the ashes which

whiten the hearth could tell her what she has come to know. And I watch her with a great relief lightening my heavy heart. The moment I have dreaded has come, and I know my power. If there is to be secret or open warfare between us, I am free to take up my weapons and fight.

‘Norman!’

I bend low down to hear what she has to say. In this new knowledge which has come to me, I have lost all fear. Her breath falls upon my cheek as she speaks.

‘Yes.’

‘What does it all mean—your living here, and this disguise? Is it poverty?’

‘Partly.’

She looks up quickly. ‘And what else?’

I suffer my hand to rest upon her fingers. They are very cold and trembling. I do not answer for a moment. I am trying to read that curious light in her fixed eyes—eyes which seem trying to see into my soul.

‘There are other reasons,’ I say at last. ‘Is it not possible that I might care to be—near you, Cora?’

Her face softens, but she does not seem altogether satisfied.

‘Do you really care still?’

‘Am I a man who forgets?’ I answer, stooping and taking one of the roses from her bosom.

‘And yet, that reason alone did not bring you here,’ she says, still unsatisfied. ‘You are different, somehow. Tell me what it is.’

I laugh—an odd little laugh which savours of bitterness. There is unconscious humour in her question.

‘Yes, I am different,’ I admit, holding her hand and looking into her eyes. ‘I have paid a great price for—for our little friendship, Cora. Don’t you think it time for me to claim my reward?’

I draw her a little towards me, as though about to take her into my arms. She does not repel me, nor does she yield herself up at once. I can feel that she is trembling, and the colour has fled from her cheeks. I release her, with a little exclamation of anger.

‘You are sorry that I am here,’ I say, rising to my feet. ‘I was presumptuous. Forgive me.’

She holds out her hands, and there are tears in her eyes. ‘Norman, don’t be cruel!’ she says softly. ‘It all seems so strange. I want you to tell me first. Am I really what has brought you here? You spoke of some other reason.’

I take her hands once more. I am no longer angry. My tone is as tender as I can make it.

‘Are you not sufficient reason, Cora?’ I say softly. ‘And yet, it is true, perhaps I may have had some other reason; nothing definite, and yet——’

‘Yet what?’

‘The place has a certain fascination for me,’ I answer slowly; ‘I seem to have a sort of feeling that if I am here, on the spot, something may turn up, something—— Are you ill, Cora?’ I ask, suddenly stooping down and drawing her half-averted face towards me. ‘How pale you look! Have I frightened you?’

Her face is blanched to the lips, and her eyes are full of fear. She rises suddenly to her feet.

‘The concert will be over,’ she says, speaking hurriedly and in a curiously strained tone. ‘Help me with my cloak quickly. I shall scarcely be able to get to my carriage before the people come out.’

She is as colourless as the cloak which I am wrapping around her bare shoulders. Her hands are cold. I fear almost that she will faint. I pour out some coffee and give it to her.

‘Drink this,’ I whisper tenderly. ‘I am sorry I said anything about—you know what. It was thoughtless of me.’

She pauses with the cup in her hand, and looks into my face with an eagerness which is almost pathetic.

‘You have changed, Norman,’ she whispers. ‘I don’t know what it is, but I am almost afraid of you. You are hiding something from me.’

‘On the contrary, I have told you everything you asked—everything there is to tell,’ I answer. ‘It is you who have changed, Cora. I never knew you nervous.’

‘I have gone through enough to shatter the nerves of a dozen women,’ she cries with a little burst of genuine feeling. ‘Norman, I cannot bear to see you like this. I am rich. Let me give you enough money to go away and live as you ought to live. I should never miss it. Oh, do let me!’

She is in earnest now—in downright feverish earnest. I feel a pang of sympathy for her as I shake my head.

‘His money, Cora? No! a thousand times no! Besides, there are my other reasons.’

Her hands are upon my shoulders and her face is upturned to mine. Yet it seems to me that there is more anxiety than tenderness in the eyes which are flashing into mine.

‘Do you mean—me, Norman? Could I not—not just now, but some day—come to you?’

Not a blush, not a tinge of colour in her cheeks. Only that look of strained anxiety.

‘There was yet another reason which I told you of, Cora,’ I whisper. ‘The hope that while I am here——’

Suddenly she sways as though her feet were giving way, and I catch her in my arms and hold her up. Her eyes are half closed, and for a moment I am afraid that she has fainted. With one hand I open the door, keeping her hidden behind it, and the rush of cold air revives her. A little tremor passes through her limbs. She opens her eyes and stands upright.

‘Good-night,’ she whispers hoarsely. ‘I must go.’

She glides out of my arms and is gone in a moment. Before I can realize it, she is out of sight, and my little room seems curiously empty and dark. Only the perfume of roses, faint and sweet, remains to keep me from asking myself whether, after all, I have been dreaming over my fire.

I cross the room, and, stooping down, pick up one from the great white mass of blossoms which has fallen from her bosom. For a moment I hold it in my hand, gazing idly at its rich creamy petals, whilst its

subtle fragrance brings a sudden rush of old memories—memories from which all the sweetness has died out for ever. Then I throw it away from me into the fire, with a laugh which rings through my little silent room. It is good. I have no longer any of this old folly to dread. The path to my goal is swept clear of one more obstacle. Bravo! John Martin, you are a famous fellow! You have borne yourself like a man. You have shown that you can fight even against a woman!

CHAPTER IV.

COMING THROUGH THE PINES.

TWO days pass, two wearisome, uneventful days, during which I have nothing to do but to sell Her Majesty's stamps and dispense my drugs, and keep myself from going mad as best I may. My visitor does not return or show any further interest in my doings. I am left with just the memory of that brief hour to alternately depress and excite me, and although I know I do best by playing a purely passive part, the monotony of it has suddenly become almost sickening.

The first break comes on the afternoon of the third day. About three o'clock a carriage and luggage cart from the Court go by towards the station, and it chances that I am at my sitting-room window when they return. The cart is well filled with trunks,

and a smart-looking maid is seated by the driver. The carriage which follows passes so swiftly that I catch only a momentary view of its solitary occupant, just a side-glance of a girl dressed in black, with pale face and clear features. But even that glance reveals her identity to me, and I know that the omission of that single word in Lady Deighton's telegram has brought her step-daughter home. It is I who have done it! It is through me that she is here! Shall I be the gainer, I wonder? We shall see. Somehow this girl's pale, proud face, with its strange likeness to her father, haunts me. All the evening I see it—in the ashes of the fire, in the blue wreaths of my tobacco-smoke, on the pages of my book. What does she believe? If she knew who I was, would she shrink from me, I wonder?

So the third day passes, and the fourth and the fifth, until Sunday comes round again. For one hour, from eight to nine o'clock, I am supposed to be on duty. Afterwards, the day is my own.

My first impressions upon rising are that it is a sunny morning. From my little bedroom window I can see across the market-square, now very still and cold-looking, and away over the rising country beyond to the line of hills which bounds the horizon westward. Sometimes these hills are dark and gloomy, topped with gray clouds and hung with floating mists; to-day they are a dim purple, save where one long slant of sunshine seems to give a yellow tone to the sloping fields and barer summit. After my bath, I open my window, and as the sweet fresh air

streams in, I plan a long walk. I will escape from the misery of seeing all my tradespeople neighbours in their sombre, ill-fitting black clothes, from the sight of that depressing semicircle of closed shutters, from all the dreary Philistinism of a country-town Sabbath. I will get right away somewhere amongst those hills, and watch this unexpected sunlight tinting and beautifying the saddened land. For a few hours Nature shall take the place of my calf-bound friends. I will forget Mr. Holmes and Mr. Mann, forget my little shop with its drugs and stamps and cheap stationery, forget my routine life and the bitterness of living amongst small things, between narrow bounds. Away on those hills I shall feel myself a man again. Bravo for a holiday!

Whilst I am dressing I hear my housekeeper arrive and prepare my breakfast. There is the clatter of cups and saucers; soon the savoury smell of something cooking. I dress myself in ancient clothes, a suit of brown tweed which has seen much service, and make my way downstairs actually whistling. My housekeeper, dressed in a black gown and prepared for chapel, shakes her head at the sound, and eyes my attire with stern disapprobation. To her ears, trained to the sonorous rhythm of Methodist hymns, the light air from an opera of Donizetti which has crept into my fancy sounds frivolous and ungodly. But this morning I am almost light-hearted. Even Mrs. Mason, with her stern, pallid face and ghost-like movements, cannot depress me. I unlock the shop-door, in case anyone has a telegram to

bring, and sit down to my breakfast with unusual appetite.

I have just finished, and am lighting my pipe, when the click of the telegraph instrument in the shop warns me of a communication. I hurry out and take down the message. It is for Lady Deighton. I write it out carefully, and read it over with a slight smile :

‘LONDON.

‘Dr. Norman Scott is in Montreal. Await instructions.

‘GAY.’

According to the rules, there is no necessity for me to deliver this until to-morrow, but as I fold it up an idea occurs to me. I will deliver it myself at Deighton Court. No doubt she will find the news interesting, and it will be all on my way. So I thrust it into my breast-pocket, and a few minutes later, my pipe in my mouth, I am striding through the empty streets of the little town.

I am soon free of it. Across the market-place, up High Street, and then a short-cut by the back of the church brings me to the bridge. Here I am on the outskirts of the town, and passing the little knot of idlers smoking their pipes and leaning against the balustrade, I commence the long ascent into higher country, with the distant range of hills now fairly in front of me.

In half an hour I am breathing a different atmosphere. The road has become a country lane, and the walls hedges. I sit down on a five-barred gate,

with my back to a fresh-smelling bean-field, and gaze idly down at the little gray town nestling in the hollow far below me. Cooped up in the midst of it, I, one of its little handful of inhabitants, find in it at no time anything to admire. Its placidity and repose have wearied me. What in one sense might have been its charm has become to me, a forced dweller there, bitter and monotonous. But from here, with the sweetness of the west wind in my face, I can look down upon it a larger man, and admire its little clustering groups of gray stone houses built around that square Norman church-tower, its quaint primitiveness and its air of being cut off from the rest of the world by that bulwark of dark fir-topped hills, bearing on their bosom those breezy stretches of common. I can even think with mild and indifferent toleration of Mr. Holmes, in the agony of a starched collar and white waistcoat, leading the brethren at prayer at Little Bethel, and of that dreary, long-winded five-and-twenty minutes' sermon. And slowly my eyes leave the little town and mount once more to the hills, and I see into the outer world from whence I came. Then thoughts and memories come flooding in upon me, my eyes grow bright and my heart swells. But I will have none of it, I tell myself sternly. Abstraction, and welcome, but no sadness this morning, no calling up the ghosts of the past, none of the weary, enervating luxury of heart-wrenching retrospect. I will have none of it, I say, with darkening face, and so I leap down into the road, and relighting my pipe, go on my way.

In an hour I am at Little Deighton. In reality it is no village, only a handful of trim thatched cottages occupied by the outdoor servants at the Court. Here I enter an iron swinging-gate, and pass along a foot-path skirting the side of the church.

For half a mile it leads across a tract of rich meadow-land, and then through two thick plantations of fir-trees. Half-way through the first I hear voices, and looking round, am surprised to see two tramps, and, to judge from their general appearance, tramps of a bad class, sitting on a piece of gray boulder, with their faces only half turned to me. The footpath on which I am walking is carpeted with brown fir-needles fallen from the bare trees, and although I walk with no light tread, I pass unnoticed. Soon I am out of sight around a bend in the path, and after a moment's mild wonder that tramps should have been allowed to find their way in, they pass out of my mind. I have no presentiment, no second thought concerning them. Certainly I have no idea that those two miserable men are to play an important part in the development of my destiny.

After emerging from the first plantation, I cross a narrower belt of meadow-land, and then through another swing-gate I enter the second, the larger of the two. This part of my walk I am enjoying immensely. There is something in the winter stillness of a wood which has always taken my fancy. The patches of blue sky one can see so clearly through the stripped tree-tops, the bare undergrowth, with here and there a brilliant blood-red or purple leaf,

the ground itself heavy with oozing weeds and decaying yellow leaves, and the silence which seems to brood over the whole land—all these things have a soothing and a pleasant effect, apart from their direct æsthetic beauty. And it seems to me that I have never appreciated them more than I am doing to-day. The confinement of the week has made the sense of liberty doubly welcome. I have taken off my spectacles, and I am feeling almost happy.

And then, in the middle of the footpath, I stop short. Someone is coming towards me, coming—nay, she has already come, for we are face to face, and she is slackening her pace, a little uncertain how to pass me, for I am a big man, and the path is small. Directly I see her, I stop short. It is about five seconds before I stand aside and she passes on ; five seconds ! the longest of my life.

She is gone ! What is it that I have seen ? A girl carrying a Prayer-Book, that is all ! And yet it seems to me a good deal. She is out of sight, and I have not moved. I am thinking of her face—thinking of it so intently that I could almost believe I see it still.

A pale, marble forehead and pale cheeks, sad eyes, the very colour of which I am uncertain about, and the Deighton mouth, delicate and tremulous. A thin, yet graceful figure, and a carriage which could scarcely fail to suggest a certain pride with which it would be hard to find fault. I do not think that I have the power to put anything else into words. There is so little that words can say, after all !

I half murmur an apology for my preoccupation as I step back into the undergrowth, and she slightly—very slightly—inclines her head. I watch her pass down the winding path, now in sight, now hidden by the trees, and when she has gone I stand there still. I see her cross the field, and I hear the gate swing behind her as she enters the first plantation. Now she is finally out of sight, and I have time to realize that this is the girl for whose appearance at Deignton Court I am responsible. This must be Katherine Deignton.

I turn round at last to resume my walk, but I have scarcely taken half a dozen steps before a thought flashes into my mind and brings me to a standstill. The tramps! She will have to pass close by them in the loneliest part of the plantation. Even if they do not speak to her, she may like to know that there is someone within hearing.

I retrace my steps quickly, and on the soft grass between the two plantations I increase my pace to a run. Just as I am nearing the gate a sound for which I have been half listening reaches me, and I set my teeth and spring forward. The sound is very indistinct, yet my ears readily interpret it. It is a muffled cry for help, partially stifled by something thrust over the mouth.

The gate is low, and I am over it with a leap which would have cleared a five-barred gate. The under-wood crashes beneath my feet as I spring round the corner. There is exactly the scene which I had pictured to myself. The girl who had passed me a

few minutes ago, and whose very carriage bespoke a certain delicate exclusiveness, is in the rude clutches of one of the men, whilst the other is calmly turning out her pockets.

I am in upon them like a whirlwind without warning or grace. My lips are close set, and I am pale with such a passion as has never before possessed me. It is the man whose coarse hands are clutching hers in a half-jeering embrace whom I am thirsting to kill. The blow which I aim at him he only half averts, and goes down across the path like a log. His companion, without a moment's hesitation, turns, and leaping the wall, bounds across the field like a hare.

Once more we are face to face. When I turn towards her it amazes me to see how cool she is. A deep spot of colour has sprung into her cheeks, and her eyes are lit with anger. She is rubbing the hand which her assailant had been holding with a handkerchief. She is angry, perhaps, but certainly not frightened.

'I am so thankful to you,' she says, smiling up at me. 'Did you hear me scream?'

'Yes,' I answer briefly, envying her her coolness. As for me, I am still shaking with passion, and I look regretfully towards the place where the other man vanished.

'You are not hurt, I hope?' I add, recovering myself a little.

'Hurt? No, I am not hurt; but the thought of that horrible man's grasp is almost worse. I could have forgiven a blow, if only he had not held me,'

she says, with a little gesture of disgust. 'I can't think how they were permitted to get in here. The keepers are generally so particular.'

'You are going to church,' I remark, glancing down to her Prayer-Book. 'Allow me to walk with you out of the wood.'

'Oh, thanks! If it isn't taking you out of your way.'

She stoops down to look at the man who lays groaning and breathing heavily at our feet.

'Is he much hurt?' she asks with a little shudder.

I examine him briefly and shake my head.

'Not nearly so much as he deserves. I will come and doctor him up whilst you are at church,' I say.

Then we turn, and I walk by her side to the end of the wood. As she shows no sign of expecting me to leave her there, I go on to within sight of the little church. Then I stop, and she holds out her hand frankly.

'You must tell me whom I have to thank for my deliverance,' she says.

I let go her perfectly-gloved little hand, which I have scarcely touched, and draw myself up.

'My name is Martin—John Martin,' I answer.

She repeats it, and I supplement the information:

'I keep the post-office and chemist's shop at Market Deighton. You may have seen the name over the door.'

I am watching for it closely, or I should scarcely have noticed the slight lifting of the eyebrows which alone denoted her surprise. She has evidently done

me the honour to imagine that I might be a gentleman.

'I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Martin,' she says simply. 'Good-morning.'

She turns away, and my quick eyes notice a slight shade of disappointment in her face. After the first moment's bitterness, I find some consolation in it. She is disappointed to find that I am only a small shopkeeper. Well, that is better than indifference.

I retrace my steps into the wood to look for the man whom I have knocked down. When I reach the place of our encounter I find it deserted. He has evidently recovered sufficiently to crawl away. I am glad of it; I owe him no ill-will. He has served a good purpose.

CHAPTER V.

'BONDS OF ROSES AND A YOKE OF SAND.'

AT about one hundred yards from the Court the broad drive divides. To the left it sweeps round to the long imposing front; the right fork leads to the stables and servants' entrance. For a moment I hesitate as I reach the partition, and then, with a little laugh, I turn to the right. Why not? I am simply here as a messenger from the post-office, and it is my proper place.

I reach the servants' quarters, and discover a footman in a linen coat smoking a pipe in the doorway. He

takes the telegram from me, and, without abandoning his easy position, passes it on to a maid-servant. Then he removes his pipe from his mouth, and favours me with a friendly stare.

‘Walked all the way?’ he inquires.

‘From Market Deignton?—yes,’ I answer.

‘Nice morning for a walk, ain’t it?’

I admit that I have found it pleasant.

‘You’ll have a glass of beer and some bread and cheese, of course?’ he continues. ‘Walker, do you hear?’ looking over his shoulder. ‘It’ll be here directly.’

I shake my head, but I am not proof against the foaming jug of home-brewed beer which is brought out almost immediately, and I find myself gravely drinking the footman’s health.

‘Like to see the ’osses?’ he asks.

I am really fond of horses, and the Deignton stables are famous, so I readily assent. Under the guidance of one of the stable-lads, we make a brief visit of inspection. Just as we reach the last stall, a thin, black-browed young woman, walking on tiptoe, and holding her skirts gathered up around her, enters the gates and beckons to my companion.

‘Is that you, Mr. James? Her ladyship wishes to see the person who brought the telegram,’ she announces, in a shrill tone with a strong foreign accent.

I am neither pleased nor displeased at the summons, and before obeying it I linger to admire a magnificent brood-mare, whose name is almost a household word.

When we emerge from the stall, the black-browed young woman is getting impatient.

'Her ladyship is not accustomed to be kept waiting,' she remarks tartly, as she leads the way across the yard.

I shrug my shoulders, and follow in silence. We enter the house and pass up a flight of back-stairs, and along a lofty corridor hung with fine old oil-paintings, into an octagonal sitting-room overlooking the park. Here the woman leaves me, with an ungracious invitation to be seated, and disappears through an inner door hidden by a curtain.

I look around, and involuntarily I admire. The hangings of the quaintly shaped little apartment are all of old blue silk and chintz, draped against a background of black oak. The chairs and couches are French, of the Louis Quinze period, and the *tout ensemble* of the chamber is distinctly and voluptuously feminine. I have no difficulty in deciding that I am in her ladyship's boudoir.

No one comes to me, and after a few minutes I rise and stroll towards the window. The view is superb. Below, a fine stretch of woodland park is bounded by those dark fir-topped hills scarcely a couple of miles away. Looking to the left, I can see the pine plantations, and the little gray church tower rising at the back. The sight of it brings back to my mind the morning's adventure. My thoughts suddenly play the truant. I seem to be looking through the old stained-glass window and across the broad stone aisle where the sunlight is falling, into

the square Deignton pew with its solitary occupant. Almost I can hear the soft rolling of the organ as the music of some chant dies slowly away, and then that deep silence which precedes the sermon, broken only by the turning of leaves and the chattering of sparrows in the ivy. And there is one face, too, that I can see—a girl’s pale, proud face with its delicate profile uplifted to the preacher as she leans back amongst the cushions waiting for his opening words. I wonder——

My reverie is suddenly broken in upon. There is the sound of a softly-opening door, and the rustle of draperies. A faint and delicate perfume has stolen into the air, a perfume as familiar to me as the scent of roses, only it does not now stir my heart and creep through all my senses as in the days gone by.

I turn round and find that Lady Deignton is almost at my shoulder. She is dressed in a morning wrap of a dead rose-colour shade, and her glorious hair is coiled loosely upon the top of her head. It is evident that she has only just risen.

‘So you would have gone away without seeing me,’ is her greeting. ‘I hope that you have an excuse ready, for I am angry.’

‘Consider my position, and have mercy upon me,’ I answer lightly. ‘Do you usually give audience to your telegraph messengers?’

I am smiling, but there is a shade of bitterness in my tone. She rests her hand upon my shoulder, and the open sleeve, falling back, discloses, not altogether

unconsciously, the whole of her white, finely-moulded arm.

‘Norman, don’t be sarcastic!’ she says quietly. ‘If you persist in masquerading——’

‘It is not altogether masquerading,’ I object.

A light suddenly leaps into her face. Her tone becomes eager, almost anxious.

‘Then it is stupid, obstinate pride,’ she says warmly. ‘There can be no necessity for your present position.’

‘There is every reason,’ I answer simply. ‘I have not a penny in the world, and I have an unfortunate but invincible objection to charity in any form. I am earning an honest living, and I am satisfied.’

‘Norman, look at me!’

I look steadily into her eyes. They are as beautiful as ever, but the light seems to have died out of them.

‘Well!’

‘Do I look tired, weary?’

‘Just a little,’ I am forced to admit, noticing, too, for the first time the dark rims underneath.

‘All night I sat up thinking of you.’

‘Of me?’

‘Yes, of you! Don’t be afraid; I am not going to make love to you. Only let me ask you this: You know whose fault it is that your life has suddenly become a failure?’

‘My own!’ I cry bitterly. ‘I am reaping what I have sown!’

‘Norman, it was not your fault. It was mine, mine only!’

I cannot contradict her. There is some truth in her words, after all.

‘It is mine ! All night long I sat thinking of you—thinking of your fine career suddenly closed, of your long, wasted life apart from your fellows, cut off from all your ambitions.’

‘Not all,’ I whisper to myself. ‘There is one which remains.’ But she does not hear me.

‘I think of your past, so brilliant with promise, and I compare it with this miserable present, and I say to myself : This is my work—my work ! Oh, it is torture ! Tell me, have you forgiven me yet ?’

‘Freely !’

‘But I cannot forgive myself. I never can, unless you help me. I am rich. There are other countries——’

Then a fire of sudden passion burns up within me. I throw off my glasses and draw myself up to my full height. I take her by the shoulders, and I keep my eyes fixed upon her face.

‘You are right !’ I cry. ‘It is you who have destroyed my life. It is you only who can build it up again. You talk of reparation. You can do it if you will. Enough of words. Answer me ! Will you do it ?’

‘If—if I can, Norman. If I can,’ she falters.

Her face is blanched, but I have no pity.

‘Then tell me the whole truth ! Tell me all that happened in this house on that accursed night. Spare none. Hide nothing. It is the truth alone I want. You say you pity me. Your eyes tell me

that you speak the truth. Good! Send me back from this miserable purgatory to work out my destiny amongst my fellows. Give me back my honour and my name. The world thinks that you are screening me. You and I alone know how false that is. Speak up and tell me whose hand it was that murdered Humphrey Deignton. Who is he that I should suffer in his stead? His name, I say! His name!

She is white to the lips, and her eyes are blank and vacant with a great fear. My hands are gripping her white dainty shoulders like a vice, but she does not seem to feel the pain. She is like one in a trance.

‘Answer me!’ I cry. ‘By God, you shall answer me!’

And then I see that she cannot. She lies in my arms a dead weight, with closed eyes and deathlike face. Her head droops over my arm, and a great coil of hair, escaped from the rest, touches the ground. Her bosom is heaving, and I can see that the fainting is only momentary. Her arms are clasped around my neck passionately, and I cannot part them, so I carry her to the couch and kneel down by her side. For a moment a touch of the old madness comes to me. The clasp of her arms is like a yoke drawing me down to her. My breath is upon her cheek, and my face is almost touching hers. Then she opens her eyes dreamily, and gives a little sigh of content.

‘Norman,’ she whispers.

The madness is over. I wrench her hands apart

almost roughly, and spring up, angry with her and bitterly ashamed of myself.

‘You are a finished actress!’ I cry. ‘I congratulate you. But, Lady Cora Deighton, I am not the man to be trifled with. I want nothing from you, save one thing only—I want the history of that night! Tell it me! You shall tell it me!’

She rises to her feet. There is a peculiar glitter in her eyes, and she points to the door.

‘Go!’

‘You refuse me!’ I exclaim.

She stamps her foot. Her head is thrown back, and her bosom is heaving. I bow my head before the storm. I know that speech on my part is useless.

‘You have been a shopkeeper long enough to forget that you should be a gentleman!’ she cries. ‘You have insulted me—you to whom I have stooped. Begone! Your name is nothing to me; clear it yourself, if you can. I have no interest in it, or you!’

So I walk out of Deighton Court with the words of her passionate dismissal ringing in my ears. As a diplomatist I feel that I have erred. As a man, I am content. Open war will suit me best.

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CHAPTER VI.

'I HAVE CLIMBED NEARER OUT OF LONELY HELL.'

THE sunshine has died out from the autumn day as I cross the downward slope of Culdon Hills and set my face towards home. The west is gorgeous with the blood-red colouring of a stormy sunset, and a few raindrops, the last of a slight shower, are falling. On the left lies Deignton Court with its Corinthian front, and imposing array of windows, and as I catch a glimpse of it through the trees, my heart grows for a moment wonderfully light. At least, I have broken for ever those bonds which at one time I stooped to wear. Not so long ago, men and women spoke of me as Lady Deignton's *bon ami*. Never again! I have passed through the fires unscathed. I am untrammelled now, at any rate, free to work out my own release, to fulfil my own destiny. The pure, cold air seems all the sweeter to me when I remember the enervating but dainty fragrance of that little blue chamber where I have fought my battle. My heart is buoyant with a certain vague sense of relief, and as I plunge into the beech woods and almost lose myself amongst the gaunt, weird shadows, I am walking side by side with pleasant memories. It is close by this spot that I met her for the first time—this girl whose proud, pure face had flashed into my memory just in time to save me from folly, just in time to kill that single spark of reawakened passion for the woman whose desire it had seemed to be to

kindle it. Then I remember that it is my own hand which has brought her here, that it is I who am responsible for the omission of that one word from Lady Deignton’s peremptory telegram. Is there anything of fate in it, I wonder? Is she destined to help me in my task? or—— But the other side I thrust away. I will not consider it; I have enough of the miseries.

I pass through the second grove, and arrive at the church. The windows are brilliantly lit, and the organ is pealing. Softly I enter the churchyard and look in. They are singing the last hymn, and there in the square pew, with her profile in relief against the black oak background, is the face for which my eyes were searching.

I have a sudden desire come upon me as I stand there and listen—a desire, somehow, to speak to her again. I feel my heart beat, and I could laugh at myself for the folly of it. But, all the same, I steal away over the gravestones like a thief in the dusk, and crossing the meadow once more, stand beneath the obscurity of a great tree, with my back to the paling.

Soon the people commence to come out—one by one at first, and then in a little stream. Last of all, two figures turn away from the village in my direction, and cross the meadow towards me. Who is it with her? I ask myself, with a quite unaccountable eagerness. I am determined to see, so I step into the middle of the footpath and walk briskly to meet them. As we draw near I give a little sigh of relief.

She is walking alone in front, and behind I recognise my friend the footman.

I pause, and step out into the wet grass to let her pass. A corner of the moon is hanging down over a belt of black trees on the left, and the air is faintly light. To my surprise, she recognises me and stops short.

‘Why, you here again, Mr. Martin?’ she exclaims.

‘Yes; I have been walking all day over the hills,’ I answer. ‘I am going home now.’

‘How tired you must be!’ she remarks.

I have turned, and am walking slowly by her side. It is a bold step, and I can see that she is a little surprised, but I affect not to see it. I am determined to claim these few minutes for my own, and to secure them, I commence to talk with all the spirit and energy I can muster.

Of what it is all about I carry away no distinct recollection; only I know that a stream of bitterness creeps more than once into my tone as the moments fly by, and I see the morrow, and the week after, and all other weeks lying before me—a dull, hopeless vista. I am the postmaster and chemist of Market Deignton, and she is the only daughter and heiress of the late Sir Humphrey Deignton, Bart. I have no right to be walking by her side even. These moments are a nightmare of delight; to-morrow will bring a bitter awakening. To-night her sense of gratitude is strong, and she is treating me as an equal; to-morrow she will see things in a more prosaic light. Perhaps she will blush to remember who walked by her side across the meadow. Bah! I

am a fool to let thoughts of to-morrow spoil the joy of to-night!

At the gate she holds out her hand with a little decisive movement, which leaves me no excuse for lingering, even had I meant to. I take it, and she lifts her eyes for a moment to mine.

‘I shall never forget your service to-day,’ she says quietly. ‘I feel that I have not thanked you half enough.’

‘It is not worth a thought,’ I murmur. ‘Your keeper would have done what I did just as effectually.’

‘But the keepers were not there.’

‘It was my good fortune,’ I answer, smiling. ‘Good-night.’

Then I raise my cap, and away I go, striding along the path across the meadow with my hands behind me and my thoughts up in the clouds. And so I walk on until the lights of Market Deignton twinkle up at me from the valley below, and I cross the bridge and pass through the silent streets of the little town to my own abode.

My housekeeper has given me up in despair, but she has left my supper. I eat what she has out set, utterly ignorant of what it is, and then remove the things myself. I poke the fire into a blaze, bring out my coffee-machine, and sit idle for awhile watching it boil. In a few minutes it is prepared, and my pipe is alight. Then I go up into my room, unlock a little iron chest which stands at the foot of my bed, and take out a little bundle of manuscript carefully tied up. Then I make my way downstairs again, and

after locking all the doors and pulling down the blind, I undo the packet and spread the sheets out on the table before me.

Since I wrote these pages I have neither opened them nor looked at them. The events of which they treat are events which are branded into my life. More than ever at this moment are they fearfully and wonderfully distinct. Yet to-night, as I sit alone in my little chamber, I am conscious of a passionate, almost a hysterical, desire to fight my way through the shadows and darkness of my life into the clear and open daylight. I recognise more fully the reason why I am here—my avowed purpose. I am anxious and impatient to take at least one step upon the way. But how ? in what direction ?

On my homeward path to-night, when my brain was busy weaving useless fancies, the somewhat trite saying of an old French writer flashed into my mind. It was to the effect that even our personal experiences personally recorded seem to us very different matter when viewed over the bridge of time. The idea has propagated another. This little record, faithfully transcribed by me in that most awful period of my life, may now, read in the light of other events, present some new phase which may help me to pierce the darkness. At any rate, I am in the mood to try. My pipe is lit, the blinds are down, and the doors are bolted. Farewell John Martin the shopkeeper ! Farewell the present, with its diurnal records of monotony and heart-sickness ! I go to dig in the past of another man. Those who care to, may go with me.

CHAPTER VII.

A NIGHT OF HORROR.

‘PORTMAN SQUARE,

‘LONDON,

‘October 18, 18—.

‘I, NORMAN SCOTT, physician, in case of sudden death, or lest my memory should after the lapse of many years have let slip any trifling detail concerning the events of the night of October 12th, in this year, here write down faithfully and truly the whole history of that night, so far as I was in any way concerned in it. And side by side with my own experiences I have transcribed such parts of the evidence of others as seems in any way to affect me favourably or unfavourably. I repeat that my object in this is twofold: first, that in the event of my death, this manuscript, duly inscribed to my executors, being found, and the unswerving accuracy of it being herewith solemnly attested to by me as before the face of Almighty God, it may impress with its truth some of those who have halted half-way between belief and disbelief, who have treated with some suspicion my living words. And secondly, because I am fully aware that at any moment in my life I may suddenly have to stand my trial for the crime of murder, of which—God knows!—I am innocent. And this clearly-written account will then be more useful for my defence than the less connected narrative which I might then be able to offer.

‘First, let me state that my name is John Norman Scott. I am of good—I may say noble—family, although of a younger branch, but of scanty means. Such fortune as I had has gone in my college education, my training at the hospitals, and establishment in a fashionable part of London as a physician.

‘It is four years since I started for myself, and I have met with marked—I may say with wonderful—success. My relatives secured my entrance into the best and most exclusive society, and from the first my practice has lain amongst people of that class. This will explain the fact that, as well as being a hard-worked physician, I have perforce borne some small part in the world of fashion. Policy rather than choice has led me to make use of the footing I obtained here, but wishing to be frank in all that I write here, I will also admit this, that an infatuation—that is the word which I desire to use—for Lady Cora Deignton was another reason for my accepting all invitations where I should be likely to meet her. The relations between us have been so freely and unjustly commented upon in the light of recent awful events that there can be no harm, nor anything injurious to me or her, in stating this, the plain truth.

‘Sir Humphrey Deignton, Bart., was one of my father’s oldest friends, and chanced to become almost my first patient. Lady Cora Deignton I met first as his wife, and I freely admit that from the first I was fascinated with her. Women and I have had very little in common, for my life has been one of hard work and carefully nursed ambition. Until I met

Lady Deignton I had not known what it was to feel even interested in one of her sex, and she, with a kindness which has turned out to be so fatal, seemed always bent on showing how charming a brilliant and sympathetic woman could appear in the eyes of a man who had somewhat the reputation of being indifferent to her sex. Unfortunately, she succeeded too well. I visited constantly at their house, encouraged—nay, urged—to do so both by Sir Humphrey and herself. I was no doubt often seen in Lady Deignton's company. Thus much is true. Nothing more! I wish to place on record this fact, that our friendship, although an unwise and even a reprehensible one, was free from any suggestion unbecoming to the relations which should exist between my friend's wife and myself. Mind, I have not denied my infatuation, or sought to minimize my folly. What I deny is that it had in any serious way escaped bounds, or had become the foundation of any guilty understanding between Lady Deignton and myself.

'Early in October, Sir Humphrey and Lady Deignton left town for their seat in the country. Sir Humphrey was suffering from gout, for which I had been attending him, and soon after his departure I received a letter begging me to run down and see him, sleep the night, and, if possible, have a day's shooting, returning the following evening. Accordingly, on October 12 I left Waterloo by the three o'clock train for Market Deignton, and arrived at the Court just in time to see my patient before the dressing-bell rang.

‘ I found him much better ; in fact, in excellent condition, and told him so. It is true that, in response to his inquiry whether I should be able to stay and shoot during the following day, I told him that, as it happened, I was free from any special case, and should be able to do so.

‘ When I left Sir Humphrey, on perfectly good terms, we had a glass of sherry together, and he sent his own servant with me to my room. It was then within a few minutes of half-past seven, and dinner was at eight o’clock.

‘ I am here compelled to admit that a certain event which happened between the time of my going to my room and my appearance in the drawing-room a few minutes after eight is withheld from this narration. In the face of death and disgrace, it must remain for ever locked in my breast. All that I can say is, that the event decided me to return to town that night. To cover my departure, I admit that I told a falsehood to Sir Humphrey. I left a note behind implying that a telegram had reached me, recalling me to London to attend an urgent case. It was lamentable, but necessary.

‘ There were only a few other guests at dinner that evening, and all of these, with the exception of the Vicar and his wife, were staying in the house. I mention these in the order in which they occur to me.

‘ Mr. and Mrs. George Crosswell, of Red Hall, neighbours, and old-fashioned country people. There could be no possible connection between them and the event.

‘Mr. Hamilton Lugard, a stranger to me and to everybody. He had brought a letter of introduction from the Austrian Consul, and turned out afterwards to be an Englishman, who, from being junior Consul at Vienna, had entered the Austrian service, and only recently returned to England. Age about forty. Apparently a gentleman of polish and position, who gave me the impression of being a little bored.

‘The Earl of Walsham, a bachelor and master of foxhounds. A servant brought him word during dinner that several of the puppies were taken with a curious sickness, and he made his excuses and departed, not returning at all that night.

‘Mr. George Houghton, Sir Humphrey’s lawyer and agent, well known to everybody.

‘Myself.

‘Lady Cora Deighton was the only lady present besides Mrs. Crosswell and the Vicar’s wife.

‘It is true that during dinner Sir Humphrey rallied me upon my silence and town appetite. I cannot deny that, nor that there was a cause for it—only it has nothing to do with the event so far as I am concerned.

‘The subsequent events of the evening, so far as regards my own movements, are briefly these. At half-past nine I left the men, who were sitting over their wine, and went softly into the writing-room adjoining the hall. There I wrote the note which has been so much discussed, and, going into the small cloak-room opposite, I got my hat and coat unperceived. The fact that no servant noticed me is

remarkable, for there were several who must have observed my movements, had they been paying the slightest attention to what was going on. I then passed down the back hall, which was empty, the servants who were not on duty being at supper, and letting myself out, walked to Midford Junction, the nearest railway-station.

‘I reached the station at twenty-five minutes to eleven, and the train was then coming in. I utterly forgot to take a ticket, being in a somewhat disturbed state of mind. At London Bridge the ticket-collector came round. He looked at me and passed on. I was, in a measure, dazed and upset by the recollection of a certain experience through which I had passed, and which had led to my flight from Deignton Court, or I should have offered to have paid him for my ticket. The only explanation which I can give for his leaving me undisturbed is that six months ago I had a season-ticket to a station on the line, and my face being doubtless familiar to him, he passed me for a season-ticket holder.

‘I walked to my house in Portman Square, and let myself in with a latch-key. I went straight to my room and stayed there until morning. Just as I was preparing to descend a telegram, of which this is a copy, was brought to me :

“ To Norman Scott, 155, Portman Square, London, W.

“ Come here at once. Sir Humphrey is dead.

“ HOUGHTON.’ ”

CHAPTER VIII.

FOR AND AGAINST.

WITHOUT any pause, for I am anxious to avoid all disjointed reflection, I take up the next bundle of papers. This is attached to a long cutting from a local newspaper, and is headed as follows: 'An account of what happened at Deignton Court immediately prior to Sir Humphrey's being found dead.'

'For my own satisfaction I have extracted from the mass of evidence given at the coroner's inquest a very brief account of all that is known of Sir Humphrey's death. This is the pith of it :

'The evening was spent at Deignton Court in the usual way, except that everyone retired to bed earlier than usual, in view of a long day's shooting arranged for on the morrow. There was no visit at all to the drawing-room on the part of the men. The Vicar's wife and Mrs. Crosswell talked, whilst Lady Deignton answered a few invitations. At 9.20 the Vicar and his wife departed, and Mrs. Crosswell, making the excuse of fatigue, retired to her room. Lady Deignton remained alone in the drawing-room until ten, when she rang for her maid to attend her. She then retired to bed, from which she was awakened on the morrow by the alarm consequent on the discovery of Sir Humphrey's state.

'To return to the men. They left the dining-room at 9.20, and, with the exception of the Vicar, who fetched his wife and departed, they went to the

billiard-room, where coffee was served to them. Mr. Lugard and Mr. Crosswell played a one-hundred game, which lasted until 10.30. Sir Humphrey and Mr. Lugard then agreed to play until eleven. At that hour the party broke up.

‘Mr. Houghton left the room, and walked across the park to his cottage. Was seen to leave, and was accosted by several gamekeepers on his way home. Mr. Crosswell went straight to his room in the east wing, and Mr. Lugard accompanied him.

‘I had left my note upon the hall-table, but, unfortunately, no one had seen it. Sir Humphrey seems to have asked for me twice during the evening, and to have obtained the idea from someone that I had retired to bed. At any rate, when he shook hands with Mr. Lugard in the corridor at the head of the stairs, he remarked :

‘“I am just going in to look Scott up for a few minutes. I have a word or two to say to him.”

‘Sir Humphrey then turned in the opposite direction to that which Mr. Lugard was taking, and walked towards the room which I was supposed to be occupying, and which was close to his own.

‘I had better here explain the position of the apartments. The one at the extreme end of the corridor, with a double view, was Sir Humphrey’s. The adjoining one was Lady Deignton’s sleeping-chamber, and a small ante-room led off from that to one in which her maid sometimes slept. These two rooms, Sir Humphrey’s and Lady Deignton’s, communicated by old-fashioned folding-doors.

‘The room number three on the corridor and next to Lady Deighton’s was the commencement of another suite generally given to bachelors, as it contained a large bath-room. It was this room which I was supposed to be occupying, and which Mr. Lugard saw Sir Humphrey enter.

‘Early on the morrow a servant entered the room in which I was supposed to be, to attend to the bath, and found the bed unslept in, and Sir Humphrey, fully dressed, lying in the middle of the room on his side, and with his face turned to the floor. The man hastened to give the alarm, and Mr. Houghton, Mr. Lugard, and the butler were fetched. They all describe the scene which they were compelled to witness as horrible in the extreme. His head was lying in a pool of blood, and his face was shockingly mutilated. An iron club, spiked at the end, with which the deed appeared to have been committed, was lying on the floor by his side. One wall of the chamber was decorated with savage weapons brought home by a relative of Sir Humphrey’s from Africa, and the club belonged to the collection. It had evidently been taken down by someone in a hurry, for the nail which had supported it was torn out. The weapon itself was light, but terribly made, and even a moderate blow on the head would have been sufficient to cause death.’

I take up the third and last paper. It is briefly headed, ‘Coroner’s Inquest.’

‘It is evident that in the absence of anything like a

clue, or any evidence concerning any outside party, the three persons on whom suspicion is likely to fall are :

‘First and chiefly, myself.

‘Secondly, Lady Deignton.

‘Thirdly, Mr. Lugard.

‘As a matter of fact, from the first the whole of the suspicion rested upon my head. My notes here comprise :

‘(1) Evidence for or against Mr. Lugard.

‘Absolutely none. His credentials are authentic, and he is recognised to be a gentleman of position. He was a stranger to Sir Humphrey Deignton. There is nothing to point in any way to his being involved in this crime.

‘(2) Evidence for or against Lady Deignton.

‘Against : None.

‘For : (1) She was on good terms with her husband. (2) To have left her room and entered that in which Sir Humphrey was found dead, she must have passed through her maid’s sleeping-chamber. In evidence the maid declared herself a light sleeper, that the door of the room was locked all night, and the key was upon her bed. This was accepted as positive and conclusive evidence that Lady Deignton did not leave her room on the night of the murder. (3) Utter absence of all motive. (4) The impossibility of a woman being able to deal such a blow. This, however, would not weigh for much with anyone who had examined the terribly spiked weapon with which the deed was done.

'So much for Lady Deighton. The next heading is, "Evidence for and against myself."

'For : (1) No passenger was booked from Midford Junction by the early morning train, and I easily proved my presence in my bedchamber at Portman Square at nine o'clock. (2) No one was seen or heard to leave the house after the dispersal of the billiard-room party.

'Against : (1) My strange and unexplained departure from Deighton Court, the time of which there is no evidence to prove. (2) My statement as to leaving Midford Junction by the 10.30 train being unsupported by any railway official, booking-clerk, or other witness. Further, the emphatic denial of the ticket-collector at London Bridge that he failed to collect the ticket of any save of known season-ticket holders. (3) The fact that there had been some scandal concerning my friendship with the family, and that my name and Lady Deighton's had been freely coupled together. (4) The fact that it was in my room that Sir Humphrey was found dead, after having expressed his intention of paying me a visit.

'Appended is the complete account of the inquest, with the *viva voce* replies of the witnesses to the coroner. No need to wade through it all. Here are the salient points in black and white. I am driven to ask myself, If I am not guilty of this murder, who is?'

On the back of the last sheet are a few hastily-written notes, more in the shape of a chronicle.

‘From the moment of my arrival at Deignton Court on the morning after the murder I was closely followed by detectives. The question of arresting me was freely debated, but, as opinion was divided, the police satisfied themselves by watching every movement of mine. At the conclusion of the evidence at the inquest I was not allowed to leave the room. The coroner was an hour summing up. What he said to the jury amounted to this: that he had no doubt as to my guilt, but they must not find a verdict against me unless they considered that there was direct and positive evidence amounting to reasonable suspicion.

‘For four hours the jury disagreed, and during that time all eyes were fixed upon me. Eventually the foreman unwillingly handed in the formal verdict: “Death from the effects of a blow delivered by some person unknown!”

‘I remain at liberty, but under constant police supervision. Wherever I move, even in my own house, I run up against a detective trying to work up fresh evidence against me. The horrible truth is forced in upon me in every possible manner, and from nearly everyone whom I have called my friends. The press and public opinion are unanimously against me. My practice, in which the whole of my capital is sunk, is ruined. Even my relatives decline to help me unless I leave the country at once. To do so would be to admit my guilt, to put myself outside all possible chance of ever proving my innocence. I have paid all my debts, and there remains to me

about two hundred pounds. My mind is resolved. I will retire to a tumble-down old manor-house on the Scottish border, which is my own property, and there I will dwell for a year until my beard is grown and my appearance sufficiently altered. Then I will seek occupation of some sort or other—I care not whether it be breaking stones on the road, so that it answers my purpose—near Market Deignton, and watch and wait. I have strength, and I have a will of iron. They shall serve me now or never. I will find that man or that woman whose burden I am bearing, and there shall be no mercy in my heart when the day comes for me to mete out my vengeance. I will have my pound of flesh! His suffering for my suffering, his life for my life! Oh, God, give me that man or that woman who has forged this chain of iron in my heart! It is just! I ask only for justice. I have sinned, but I have repented. Let this punishment not endure for ever!’

* * * * *

Of course, it is apparent that I am Norman Scott. I have followed out my design to the letter. I am the village chemist at Market Deignton, unrecognised in my thick beard and glasses by those who saw me only, pale and haggard, at that awful inquest. Fortunately I had never visited Deignton before. No one has suspected me save Lady Deignton. As yet I have learnt little, but I am not dispirited. On my finger I wear a ring engraven with the motto of our family—‘My time comes.’ For it I am content to wait. And so I sell my drugs and my stamps, and

despatch my telegrams, and I keep ever before me, written in my heart, those three words, 'My time comes.'

And all the while the great world goes on its mighty way, although down here its echoes fall faintly upon my ears. I am forgotten! I was a nine days' wonder, and my name is no longer for ever on men's tongues. And as for me myself, my life has become quiet and harmonious enough. Books, which before I was too busy to value—busy, as I am now beginning to acknowledge, with lesser things—are beginning to lay me under their sweet bondage. I am drifting into a not unhappy state—a dilettante scholar, a rambler in the pleasant byways of literature, and in a measure it is the smallness and monotony of my surroundings which have driven me into the larger life. For that I am duly thankful. Yet I never forget this, that in myself there are two selves. There is the easily contented student who finds amongst his books a pleasant resting-place; and there is the man whose whole life is filled with one passionate desire, unextinguishable and unchanging.

CHAPTER IX.

A VISIT FROM MADEMOISELLE HORTENSE.

MONDAY morning dawns upon a slow, constant down-pour of rain. The gray clouds are thick and low, and the rain descends in a hopelessly straight manner, which leaves no room for doubt as to the prospects of the day. Already as I sit at breakfast there are large puddles in the market-place, and a perfect little torrent rushes along in the gutter by the side of the path. The gray and brown fronted houses have a soaked and washed appearance. There is not a soul in sight. Evidently I shall have plenty of leisure to-day.

And so I have. Up to eleven o'clock scarcely a customer has passed the threshold of my little shop. I have given up standing behind the counter and gazing out into the empty street. My present position is a far more comfortable one. I am seated in my easy-chair, drawn out a little way from its corner, with a pile of books on the table by my side, and my pipe in my mouth.

My face is turned towards the window, and at the sound of rapidly approaching wheels I glance up. A smart tax-cart flashes by and pulls up at the shop door. I only get a very brief glimpse of the occupants, but I can see that there are two. The man driving is a groom, and wears the Deighton livery. By his side is a feminine form, but so enveloped in a mackintosh and overshadowed by the umbrella that I

can form no idea as to who she is. Odd that my heart should beat like this. Am I getting nervous, I wonder? Odd, too, that I should be so acutely conscious of a pang of keen disappointment as from my rapidly gained point of vantage behind the counter I recognise entering the shop Lady Deighton's black-browed maid.

She sets down her umbrella and shakes her mackintosh.

'A change from yesterday, this,' I remark.

She looks up and recognises me—recognises me, that is to say, as the postmaster of Deighton.

'It is horrible, desolate,' she assents in a strong foreign accent. 'Ah, I remember: you were at the Court yesterday.'

'I brought a telegram,' I answer. 'Not compulsory on the Sabbath, you know, but the walk was pleasant.'

'Ah, you English are such walkers. Will you give me, if you please, one shilling's worth of stamps?'

I take them from the till, and push them across the counter to her. Glancing up, I notice that she is watching me curiously.

'My lady found plenty to say to you yesterday,' she remarks.

Under ordinary circumstances I should have made no reply to a speech which savours of familiarity. But Mademoiselle Hortense is an object of interest to me. She is one of the few persons who are concerned in the 'Event.' I shall not be sorry to be on friendly terms with Mademoiselle Hortense.

'Her ladyship was good enough to be interested

in some details of postal work,' I say carelessly. 'She is very affable.'

Mademoiselle shrugs her shoulders. 'There are many people who do not find her so.'

She has produced a letter from her pocket, and carefully detaching a stamp from those which I have given her, she affixes it. The envelope is face upward and turned towards me. I do not scruple to read it. It is addressed to

‘ *The Daily Telegraph*,
 ‘ Fleet Street,
 ‘ Advt. Dept.’ ‘ London.

There is the crack of a driving whip outside in the street, from which Mademoiselle divines that her escort is getting impatient. She fastens up her mackintosh, shakes her dripping umbrella, and bids me ‘Good-morning.’ Her dark, heavy features relax into something approaching a smile as I slip out and open the door for her. On the pavement she looks back.

‘The letter I left on the counter, you will despatch it?’

‘Certainly,’ I answer.

Then she mounts into the dogcart and drives off. David is out for a few moments with a bottle of medicine. I am alone in the shop with that letter.

I take it up and hold it pensively in my hand. So Mademoiselle is going to advertise. What about? Doubtless she is going to leave her situation. Perhaps——

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I abandon my speculation for a brief mental protest against the folly of buying cheap stationery. Mademoiselle's envelope is cheap and flimsy. Behold the consequence: her letter lies open in my hand! If I despatch it in such a fashion its contents will probably get lost in the post.

I moisten the flap and thump it on the counter. It is useless. There is absolutely no gum there. What shall I do? Bundle it in amongst the other letters, and let it take its chance? or shall I play the good Samaritan, and address another envelope for Mademoiselle? I decide upon the latter course.

I shake the contents of the letter out upon the counter, and dipping my pen in the ink, am in the act of directing a fresh envelope. But my hand suddenly becomes rigid. Mademoiselle's advertisement, of two lines only, stares me in the face, and my eyes rest upon it fascinated. It is too late for me to consider any nice point of propriety or impropriety. I have no thought now of proceeding with my task, at any rate for the present. As soon as I am capable of any action at all, I take up the letter and envelope, and pass into my little back room, carrying them with me.

CHAPTER X.

A WOMAN GRAY AND GHOSTLY.

IF this were a novel, and I the hero, naturally I should make some effort to gloss over my conduct. But as I am writing a plain narration of facts—an autobiography—I do not attempt to do anything of the sort. To be frank, I will confess that what I did I did without scruple, and without any interference from my conscience. I stood up by the table in my little room and read Mademoiselle Hortense's letter and advertisement. The former ran as follows :

‘POSTE RESTANTE,
‘MARKET DEIGNTON,
‘ — SHIRE.

‘DEAR SIRS,

‘Kindly insert enclosed advertisement in the Agony column of the *Daily Telegraph* three times, and forward replies to A. C. X., address as above.’

Copy of advertisement :

‘Wanted, for his own advantage, address of Dr. Norman Scott, late of Portman Square.’

The papers slip from my hand on to the table, and I stand there for a full minute, stunned. ‘For his own advantage!’ What can it mean? Mademoiselle Hortense is one of the persons concerned in the ‘Event.’ Norman Scott is another of them. The inference is plain. It is in connection with the ‘Event’ that Mademoiselle Hortense desires to communicate

with him. What has she to say? At the inquest she was silent. She knew nothing. To-day she wishes to reopen the past. Was her evidence false? has she been in the secret all the time, or has she more recently discovered something? I feel my heart beating faster and faster. Last night there seemed to be no rift in the clouds, and I had found myself perforce driven to do battle with the first icy touch of an enervating despair. 'For his own advantage!' I repeat the words. Is this a plot of Lady Deighton's, or is it indeed the first gleam of light? I forget the black brows and dark saturnine face of Mademoiselle Hortense. To me at that moment she is little short of an angel.

There is only one course to pursue. I reseal the letter in a fresh envelope, and carefully address it. Then with my own hands I drop it into the post-bag.

* * * * *

The rain never ceases all day. Heavy yellow clouds, without the semblance of a break in them, hang low down in the sky, and discharge a continual and pitiless downpour. Early in the afternoon a thick, steaming mist rises up from the moisture-sated earth and hangs about the market-place, blotting out completely the hills in the background. The lamps, lit before three o'clock, burn with a dim, sickly light, casting feeble reflections upon the miniature torrents which pour down the gutters, and great pools of water stand about in the hollows and badly-paved places of the market-place.

But, notwithstanding the hopelessness of the weather,

Mademoiselle is not the only visitor from Deighton Court who enters my shop during the day.

The arrival of Mrs. Mason, come to prepare my afternoon tea, disturbs me from a brown study, which has become almost a doze. I watch her move about the room with only half-awakened eyes. Then the hissing of the tea-kettle and the clatter of crockery in the back room, followed by the stealthy, purring entrance of my cat—all cheerful and familiar sounds—remind me that the worst part of the day is over. I stand up upon my hearthrug, and after a shuddering glance around, draw the curtains close and light the lamp.

Just as I have concluded, Mrs. Mason enters with the teapot, and glancing carelessly in her direction, I utter a little exclamation.

‘Mrs. Mason,’ I ask, ‘whatever is the matter with you?’

She has the appearance of a woman struggling with a mortal sickness. Her face is white and ghastly, and her eyes full of a strange bright light. She is as neat in her appearance as usual. Her gray hair is carefully parted and brushed, and her black gown is trim and faultless; but her face is as the face of a dying woman.

She sets down the teapot and looks at me, making a great effort to control her features.

‘It is the weather, I think, sir, nothing more. It depresses me. I am not ill.’

I have my own idea as to the truth of this statement, and I call her back.

‘Mrs. Mason!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Let me feel your pulse.’

‘I would rather not, sir. I am not ill. I do not require any medicine.’

‘Nonsense!’ I reply. ‘You are ill. No one could look at you and doubt it. Let me feel it at once.’

She suffers me to do so under protest. I ask her a few more questions, to which she returns me unwilling, but apparently truthful, answers. To my surprise, I can find nothing whatever in her system to account for her appearance. I put my watch in my pocket, and look at her longer and with more interest than I have ever done before.

‘Are you in trouble, Mrs. Mason?’ I ask. ‘Have you had any sudden shock?’

She evades my glance, and shows a marked desire to depart.

‘None, sir. Your tea is getting cold, sir. I will fetch the toast.’

‘You are very obstinate, Mrs. Mason,’ I remark.

‘I don’t wish to appear so, sir,’ she answers. ‘There is nothing the matter with me, indeed. It is the weather.’

She goes out, and reappears in a moment with the toast. I watch her carefully as she sets it down. Her hand is as white as the table-cloth, and is shaking violently. Her face is gray and pinched. The light in her eyes is as bright as ever.

‘Mrs. Mason.’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Do you know that I am a doctor?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And, as a doctor, I can see that you are at the present moment in a state of violent agitation. You need some sal volatile, which I will give you directly. But before I do so, tell me what is the matter with you. Don’t be a foolish woman, now. Have you had any bad news?’

She breaks down at last, wringing her hands piteously and giving way to a little hysterical sob, half of pain, half of fear. I lead her, unresisting now, to my easy-chair, and force her to sit down. Then I call David to bring me some sal volatile from the shop. When it arrives she is quite helpless, and swallows it without protest.

‘Sit where you are, Mrs. Mason, while I have my tea. Don’t attempt to move.’

She does not answer or make any sign of having heard me. She has turned her face away, but I can see that the tears are gathering in her eyes.

I leave her alone, save to briefly forbid her once more to move. Then I go back to the table and pour out my tea, taking care not even to glance in her direction. In about ten minutes I have finished. Then I light a cigarette and stand over her by the hearthrug.

‘Mrs. Mason.’

No answer. I can see that she has been crying, and the tears are gathering once more in her eyes, and her lips are trembling. It is a good sign. When she has wept the tension will be over. She will be able to talk to me rationally then.

I am not disappointed. In a few minutes I can see, from over the top of a book which I have taken up, that the tears are streaming down her cheeks. Soon after she rises, with her handkerchief in her hand.

‘I am much obliged to you, sir. I am better now.’

I lay down my book. She makes a movement as though to go and clear the things away, but I check her.

‘Tell me all about it, Mrs. Mason,’ I say quietly. ‘You are in trouble. Perhaps I can help you.’

She shakes her head sadly.

‘Not you, nor any living man,’ she says in a tone which reaches scarcely above a whisper. ‘I thank you for your kindness, sir. I am quite able to take the things out now.’

I shrug my shoulders and leave her alone. After all, she has a perfect right to keep her own counsel if she is so disposed. But why? What is the mystery about the woman? There was no mistaking the look in her face, which has yet only half disappeared. It was terror—wild, tremulous terror! What can have caused it? She is a widow, they tell me, and she lives alone. Whence this mysterious, palpitating fear? The dramatic side of human life, with all its mighty forces of passion and crime, sacrifice and honour, has always seemed to me a thing far removed from the primitive dwellers in this old-world town. Day by day the faces of my neighbours passing constantly before me carry their little lives writ out plain in every feature. There is not one of them in whose

heart fate seems to have sown the seeds which bring forth great things, whether of good or evil. The place and its associations, so far as a casual dweller here can judge, might serve as the very type of rusticity and bucolicism ; and it is here my house-keeper tells me that she has spent all her days. She has neither friends nor relations in the world outside. Yet, at this very moment, as she moves about with set, white face, she is nerving herself to face some deadly fear. She is fighting against some horrible thought with an unnatural and unwholesome desperation. She is, unless I am very much mistaken, one of the figures in some village tragedy. Who knows what may be lurking behind that pale, passionate face, with its indrawn lips and steely eyes ?

Nature, which made me of a contemplative turn of mind, made me also a dabbler in the external features of psychology—at any rate, an interested student of the little cycles of life perpetually crossing and recrossing my own. For months Mrs. Mason has represented to me merely a unit, a machine by means of which the necessities of human life have been brought to me. But from this moment she occupies a different and more dignified position in my regard : she has become a morsel in the great whole of humanity. She is a woman who has in her life a touch of that which, whether it be developed in channels of good or evil, at any rate elevates the human being above the beast. Neat, self-possessed, and self-restraining, she scoops the crumbs from my table-cloth, folds it up and places all the little appur-

tenances of my tea-table in their proper places. She knows that I am watching her curiously through the little cloud of blue smoke blown out from my cigarette, but it does not disturb her. She is getting the better of her momentary lapse from the automaton to the woman. By to-morrow morning she will have lapsed once more into the cold-faced, gray-haired little woman who goes through her duties always with the same unvarying neatness and method. But her day's trials are not yet over.

The silence in the street without is suddenly broken by the rapidly approaching sound of horses' feet. Pit-a-pat ! pit-a-pat ! pit-a-pat ! they come as regular as clockwork, the perfectly even tread of well-matched carriage horses. They are crossing the market-place towards my shop ; now they are coming round in front of it, and—yes—they have pulled up at the door. I myself have plenty of food for speculation in the advent of my customer, whoever he or she may be ; but I chance to glance towards Mrs. Mason, and my personal interest is immediately eclipsed. She is standing perfectly still, listening. A stony, intent look has crept into her face, and she seems to have forgotten the plate which she has in her hands—forgotten even my presence. She is holding her breath.

There is the sound of carriage steps being let down, then the rustling of skirts as a lady sweeps into the shop, and a voice, proud and imperative without any leaven of graciousness. I am watching Mrs. Mason steadfastly—watching her with an interest for which I

cannot account. What does it mean? That look is back again, her face is blanched with fear, and her eyes are gleaming with a terror-stricken light. Decidedly Mrs. Mason is a very singular woman.

The situation is suddenly dissolved. David's head is thrust through the doorway between the shop and my sitting-room.

'Her ladyship, sir,' he announces in an awe-hushed tone. 'She is asking for you.'

I throw away my cigarette and prepare to make my way into the shop. At the door I glance round once more at Mrs. Mason. She is standing quite still, with one hand pressed to her side and that strange look still engraven on her face. So I leave her.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TEMPTRESS.

LADY DEIGHTON is sitting with her back to me, writing. She does not look up at my entrance, nor take any notice of my respectful greeting. So far I have no clue as to how she intends to receive me. Not that I am very anxious about it. If I have any preference at all, I would rather it were open war between us. All that I ask is to have my hands free to strike. She and I have drifted apart now, and between us lies the gulf of those bitter words, and her scornful dismissal of me from Deighton Court. I

want no bridge across that gulf. As things are, so would I rather that they remained. What her visit here to-day bodes I cannot tell.

I notice that David has his hat on, and is standing before Lady Deignton in an expectant attitude. From the fact that his eyes are fixed upon the note which she appears to be writing, I conclude that he is to be her messenger. I am not supposed to know this, however, and I question him a little sharply :

‘Where are you going, David?’

He answers me in a hushed, but excited tone :

‘To Deignton Court, for her ladyship.’

I say nothing. Lady Deignton glances up, languidly closes her note, and meets my inquiring gaze with cold indifference.

‘I have forgotten an address to which I desire to telegraph,’ she explains. ‘I am sending your assistant home in the carriage for it. I suppose you can spare him?’

‘Certainly, if it is necessary,’ I answer. ‘Cannot your ladyship’s footman take the note?’

She looks up at me with a faint, but decided frown.

‘I do not choose to send notes by my servants unless I know them. As it happens, my footman is a fresh one. I can find another messenger if you prefer it.’

‘There is no necessity. David can go,’ I answer without apparent reluctance ; but inwardly I am chafing. It means that I am to have the honour of her ladyship’s company for the best part of an hour, and it is an honour which I do not desire. I have scarcely admitted even to myself all that I passed

through during our last interview. I am no creature of steel, but a man of flesh and blood, and more than once yesterday afternoon I had felt myself growing weak. The old fires are not yet altogether burnt out, nor are the old days as the days of another world. There is a certain curve of her shapely head, a certain gleam in her eyes, a certain softening of her tone, which are dangerous still to me—dangerous alike to that sworn purpose of my life and to the rigid control which I have imposed upon myself in all my intercourse with her. True, I have fought against them and conquered. I have gone into the fire and borne myself unscathed. But in the lonely hours which have passed since then there has crept into my heart some faint reaction of tenderness towards her, which has made the memory of my victory seem a very barren triumph. A boy's first love dies hard, and it is idle to deny that in a way—however unworthy a way—I have loved this woman. I find no pleasure in such a confession as this. I am ashamed to make it; and yet I have promised myself that this narration shall be a mirror to all my feelings, and I must be faithful to myself. Even now how strong am I? At the thought that in a few minutes she and I will be alone once more my heart is beating fast and my senses are growing confused. I am in ill trim for battle to-day.

From behind my mahogany desk I watch her slowly finish her note—watch the pose of her bent head, the heavily-fringed, downcast eyes, and the blue-veined white hand whose delicate fingers are clasping the gold

pencil with which she writes. She is wearing a dark sealskin coat and turban hat. Oddly enough, I can remember going with her into Bonds' to choose them. I am curious to know whether she, too, remembers that day, whether she thought of it when she elected to wear them this afternoon. The coat is a little out of season now and a trifle old-fashioned. Perhaps she remembered.

The note is finished at last and sealed. The footman summoned to the door receives a few careless instructions from her ladyship. Then David departs, holding himself stiffly, and fully impressed with the importance of his mission. The carriage-wheels roll away in the distance. She and I are alone!

I hear the slow rustling of her silk skirts as she regains her chair, but I do not immediately quit the shelter of my winged desk. Considering the manner of our last parting, it seems to me that it must remain with her to make the first advances. She has come to me. Good! Let her declare herself. Let her say whether she comes as friend or foe. So I remain there in silence, until at last she speaks.

'Mr. Postmaster!'

I emerge from my semi-obscurity and stand before her. Her face and her tone are alike inscrutable. I am not able to judge in what mood she has come.

She looks at me in mock approval. 'Quite the country shopkeeper's attitude,' she remarks blandly. 'Dear me! who can say after this that men have not the gift of adaptability? How naturally you seem to fit into your new sphere of life!'

Sarcasm is a weapon which she can use until she is tired. I am proof against that, at any rate.

‘Much obliged,’ I answer, bowing. ‘Anything I can get your ladyship?’

‘Excellent! excellent!’ she applauds satirically. ‘But, after all, you are a little wanting in some respects.’

‘I shall be proud if your ladyship will condescend to instruct me,’ I answer.

‘Exactly. Well, you must remember that I am the great lady of your neighbourhood. It is an honour for you to have me inside your poky little shop. You ought to be more obsequious! You should bring me out your own easy-chair and a footstool from the back parlour. In fact, I rather think that you ought to invite me to go in there and sit down.’

‘I will not presume so far as that,’ I answer, ‘but if your ladyship finds that chair uncomfortable, I will get you another.’

‘You need not trouble,’ she answers coolly. ‘I do not propose to remain here to be an object of curiosity to any of the little townspeople who come in for stamps or drugs.’

‘You are going across to the inn?’ I remark. ‘I am afraid you will find it very wet crossing the market-place. Shall I go and borrow an umbrella for you? I don’t possess one myself.’

She looks at me for a moment honestly, and the reproach in her eyes troubles me.

‘You are very inhospitable. I was thinking of

spending the time in that battered old easy-chair of yours, and warming my petrified feet upon your fender.'

'You will be very welcome,' I answer gravely, lifting the flap of the counter for her to pass through. 'It is not for me to remind you that your presence in the back parlour of a little shopkeeper might give rise to some—remark. If you are indifferent, it is no concern of mine.'

'It is, as you say, no concern of yours.'

She shrugs her shoulders, and sweeps past me with inscrutable face. In a moment we are standing face to face upon my worn hearthrug. Then her expression changes, and her face is inscrutable no longer. She is resting her delicately gloved hand upon my shoulder, and looking up at me with a marvellously soft gleam in her eyes. She has become in one moment the Cora of those past days. My pulses respond to her touch, and something of the old tenderness creeps into my heart. Is she seeking to minister to it, I wonder? It would almost seem so. A peculiar perfume, one which years ago she dedicated to me, is shaken into the air with every movement of her body, and mingles with the sweet fragrance of a bunch of dark home-grown violets which are hanging loosely from the bosom of her coat. In the firelight the few sharp lines have quite vanished from her face. She stands there a gloriously beautiful woman, whose presence seems to light up my shabby little room, and there is a light in her eyes at once winning and beseeching, which speaks to me more

plainly than any words could do. Yet my heart tells me that I have nothing to fear. The days of my slavery are numbered, they have passed away. I am regarding her, even at this moment, if not altogether impersonally, at any rate without any of that responsiveness which her eyes are seeking to win from mine. She is there, within reach of my arms; she has found her way in upon a life as lonely and joyless as the life of any man can be. We are alone in the dusky firelight, and everything about her—her attitude, her softly gleaming eyes, and the perfume from her dress and the flowers from her bosom—seem designed to recall those other and more passionate days when at her most careless nod I should have followed like a slave, and to have kissed her hand would have seemed a priceless boon. Yet now more than ever I am conscious of the gulf which yawns between us. My love, such as it was, has perished.

I wonder whether she sees it. Her eyes are soft almost to tears, and her voice is sad.

‘I am afraid—I know that I have come on a fruitless errand.’

I do not know what her errand may be, but if she comes to me as the Cora of old days, seeking to revive the old tenderness, her errand is fruitless indeed. But I say nothing; I wait.

‘You do not—care for me any longer. My happiness is nothing to you. Oh, I know it! I know it! Your face tells me.’

The pearl-gloved hand which has been resting upon my shoulder grasps it tightly. Her eyes are

suddenly bright and eager. Her lips are quivering.

‘You have come here in disguise, with a purpose. All your life is shaped to that purpose. You are bent upon unearthing the past.’

For the first time I answer her with no pretence at concealment. What would be the good? She cannot hinder me.

‘If I am,’ I cry, ‘can you wonder at it? I will tell you the truth: I am here to win back my name. Until I have done that I cannot be said to be living at all. I am penniless, friendless, an object of suspicion to every man and woman who has read the details of—of the “Event.” Sometimes I fancy that you scarcely realize my ostracism and my degradation. Lady Deignton,’ I continue, looking her steadily in the face, ‘do you know that after that inquest my name was expunged from both my clubs, that people shunned me in the streets as though I were a leper, that my own relations, my own flesh and blood, prayed me to crawl out of the country, to consent to my own social extinction? Can you wonder that, knowing myself to be innocent, knowing, too, that I was bearing upon my shoulders the burden of another man’s sin, I swore to track that man down, wherever and whoever he may be? And I shall do it, Lady Deignton. Some day I shall do it.’

Her face has grown very white and set. I can see that she is making a great effort to keep calm. It is a desperate woman who stands there facing me.

‘Norman, my errand to you is this. At least listen

to it. I have come to offer you everything I possess in the world to go away from this place, and let the event die out of men's minds. The thought of you here is a nightmare to me. I cannot sleep or rest. And if it were to be reopened, if all the miserable story were once more to fill the papers, and echo all around me, oh, I could not bear it! I could not bear it! I should die!

I shake my head. 'You ask too much, Cora,' I say as kindly as I can. 'It is my honour. What is there more bitter in the world than to have a name, and yet fear to use it; to skulk, as I am doing, under a miserable alias?'

Her arms are suddenly around my neck, clutching me desperately, striving to draw my face down to hers. A very storm of passion is in her tone and in her eyes. I can feel that she is shaking from head to foot.

'Norman! Norman! what can the world give you that I cannot give you? I am rich. I will go with you to any part of the world you choose. What is a man the better or the worse for the name he bears? Our life lies in the future, not in the past. Oh, let me teach you to forget! Listen to me, Norman my love, my love!'

Then, as I stand there listening to her frantic words, and gazing into her passion-stricken face, white to the lips with feverish anxiety, there comes to me like the funeral knell of all my hopes a hideous, a demoniacal thought. A cold shudder passes through me from head to foot. I wrench

myself free from her in horror, and step back, holding my hands stretched out before me. Yet all the time my eyes are fixed wildly upon her face, seeking to read the thoughts which are flying through her brain.

Words come to me at last, but my throat seems suddenly dry and hot. I can only speak with difficulty, and my voice sounds harsh and disjointed.

‘Cora ! Cora ! for the love of God, don’t—don’t let me think it !’ I cry. ‘Don’t !’

I stand there petrified, wondering at the swift change. Lady Deignton is herself again, pale, languid, and supercilious. The passion has died out of her face like breath from a mirror. I glance behind in wonderment. Mrs. Mason is standing there like a carven figure.

‘Mrs. Mason, what do you want ? Why are you here ?’ I ask, striving to command my voice.

‘I beg your pardon, sir. I am sorry to have startled you. I knocked at the door, and as you did not answer, I thought you were in the shop, and I was coming through to you.’

‘What do you want ?’

‘I should like a bottle of the medicine that you gave me this afternoon, sir, if it is not troubling you too much.’

‘You shall have it presently, Mrs. Mason,’ I say, gathering my wits together as well as I may. ‘Lady Deignton, will you allow my housekeeper to make you a cup of tea ?’ I say, turning to my visitor, who has sunk into the easy-chair, with her face in the shadow.

‘Thank you, it is not worth while,’ she answers, with a slight yawn. ‘My people will be here in a few minutes.’

Mrs. Mason curtsies to her ladyship, who barely acknowledges the salutation. There is an odd expression in my housekeeper’s face which I do not understand. Then she retires, closing the door softly.

We are alone again, but there is an impatient rapping on the shop counter outside, growing louder and louder.

‘Mr. Martin ! Mr. Martin ! are you there ?’

It is the second summons. If I do not go I risk an invasion into the parlour. I bow to the inevitable and go.

My customer is a farmer who has a cow ill, and wishes to telegraph for the veterinary. He is in a state of great agitation, and I have first to write the telegram out for him, and then he insists upon waiting while I despatch it. Before I can get rid of him, the Deighton carriage is at the door, and my heart sinks as I hear the rustling of skirts, and Lady Deighton sweeps through the door of my parlour and out into the shop. She takes a paper which David has brought, and writing for a moment or two on a telegraph form, folds it up and hands it to me.

‘I thank you for the shelter of your sitting-room, Mr. Martin,’ she says coldly. ‘Good-afternoon.’

She walks across the shop and steps into her carriage, and I watch her in a dazed sort of way, struggling all the time with a mad impulse which

bids me rush after her and force the whole hideous truth from her lips, even though it be the seal of my own destruction. I hear the carriage-wheels roll away, and David's voice recalls me to the present. Mechanically I hurry through my duties, and retire into my little back-room. Oh that I might awake and find it a dream, this strange visit of hers, that passionate prayer, this hideous new thought stealing like poison into my heart and blighting every thought and hope of the future! Oh, my God, that this thing may not be true! I who have prayed but seldom in my life lift up my hands to the ceiling of my little room, and out of the agony of my heart I cry aloud. My God! that this thing may not be true, that my lips may not be sealed for ever, that I may not be entombed in this living death while life lasts! Then I sink into my chair and bury my face in my hands. If it be true, then at last I believe in a hell—a hell on earth.

The hours pass by. I cannot sleep, I cannot rest with this fear upon me. To-night must end it. Better the truth, and one leap into the dark waters of the Deignton river, than this wild tempest of heart-sickening doubt.

CHAPTER XII.

WAS THINE THE HAND?

My shop is closed, and Mrs. Mason has gone. The moment I am assured of this I hurry into my thickest boots, and catching up a stick, start on my walk. There is the glow of a cheerful light behind the drawn blinds of most of the little windows past which I hasten, but not a soul in the streets, not a soul all the way along those wet country lanes where the high black hedges loom against the black sky, and never a star comes out to light me on the way. A night of desolation has followed a dreary day. The whole earth is moisture-sated and sad. A dull wind sobs in the tree-tops, and at every gust the branches discharge little showers of dripping wet. Here and there I am ankle-deep in sticky, sandy mud ; more than once I find myself knee-deep in a flooded portion of the road. I do not heed it. I have but a solitary care, only one desire.

The walk, with all its discomforts, its weird sights and strange night sounds, passes like a dream. For all my impatience, I am amazed when I find myself at last at my journey's end. It seems only a few moments ago since that hideous, crushing idea first found its way into my brain, and I passed out into the soaked streets and felt the lingering rain-drops cooling my hot cheeks, and, behold ! I am here at Deighton Court. In a few moments I shall know.

I pass round to the servants' entrance and ring

the bell. The girl who answers it does not know me.

‘Is Lady Deignton at home?’ I ask.

‘At home? Yes; she is at home.’

‘Will you tell her that the postmaster from Market Deignton is here? Ask if I can see her for a minute.’

The girl looks at me doubtfully.

‘Hadn’t you better send a message?’ she suggests.

‘Her ladyship is going in to dinner directly.’

I shake my head.

‘It is important. She will see me,’ I answer.

‘Please to let her know.’

I sit down in a large comfortable room near the kitchen, and my friend the footman, seeing me there, comes and talks to me curiously. I suppose I answer him; I do not remember now. I am conscious only of a fierce impatience for that girl’s return. In time she arrives.

‘Her ladyship will see you for a moment in the library,’ she announces.

To the library I go, preceded by the footman—a great dimly-lit room. As yet it seems to me untenanted. But when the door is closed, and I am left standing there, I hear the rustling of skirts, and my lady advances from the deeper shadows. There is a diamond star flashing in her wonderful hair, and diamonds on the plain band of black velvet which encircles her white, shapely throat. She is wearing a low-cut dinner-gown of black net, unrelieved by any colour save for a great bunch of Neapolitan violets,

whose odour is making the air around faint and sweet. My time has come! We are standing face to face, and she is waiting for me to speak, waiting with features which are marble in their pallor, and coldly-inquiring eyes. Yet even at that supreme moment, the pathos of it all is keenly apparent to me. I look down at my worn, almost ragged clothes, dripping with rain and splashed with mud, and involuntarily I raise my hand to my unkempt, wind-tossed hair. What an object I am to confront this elegant, serene woman, with her graceful presence and dainty toilette! What a contrast!

‘You have something to say to me,’ she remarks in measured tones. ‘What is it?’

Then I gather up my wits and check the dry little laugh which somehow has forced its way from my lips. I look her in the face, and I keep my eyes steadfastly fixed upon hers.

‘Cora, something has come into my mind—something more terrible than anything I have ever dreamed of. I have come here because I cannot rest until I know the whole truth concerning it. This afternoon you came to me—you prayed me to abandon the purpose which has brought me here, the one hope which keeps me still in touch with life. You—you——’

‘Stop!’

I pause. She has arrested me with a sudden gesture and one imperative word.

‘You were firm. You decided to go your own way. Nothing that I could offer had any tempta-

tion for you. The matter is over. What has brought you here?’

I draw a step nearer to her and look around. The door is closed. We are in the centre of the room, secure from all listeners.

‘One thing in this world, one word from you alone, Cora, could break my purpose,’ I whisper hoarsely. ‘Say it, and my hand drops nerveless. I move no more. I give myself up to the speediest death I can find.’

‘She meets my eyes boldly. There is not a tinge of colour in her cheeks. Her breathing is perfectly regular. I am a fool; I have dreamed a fool’s dream.

‘I have no further word to say upon the matter,’ she answers, gathering up her skirts in her hand as though preparing to go. ‘I advised you as I thought for the best. You thought otherwise. Good! Go your own way. I am indifferent.’

Surely I have been a fool. But I will destroy all chance of a relapse. I have come here to speak certain words, and I will speak them.

‘Tell me this,’ I say, drawing so close to her that I can feel her breath upon my cheek. ‘Nothing that I can ever discover of the story of that night can bring harm—upon you?’

Then we stand and face one another in complete silence. A little French clock is ticking on the mantelpiece, and a piece of burning log falls off into the grate with a little splutter. The closely-drawn curtains shut out all sound of wind and rain. I can

hear her breathing a little quicker now, and I can hear my own heart beat. The word for which I am waiting is the word of death or life to me.

For a moment I fancy that she falters. There is a slightly gray tinge in her cheeks, and her eyes have lost their languor. Yet, after all, why should she not be shaken? Have I not asked her in plain words whether it is not her burden I am bearing? whether those white hands are the hands of a murderess?

The extreme tension passes away with the sound of her voice, and I am thankful for it.

‘I understand,’ she says slowly. ‘You wish to ask me whether I am the guilty one for whose crime you are suffering? If so, you will be generous, you will spare me, you will sacrifice your great desire for the sake of—our past friendship. How chivalrous! How noble! What you refused this afternoon, when I stooped to show you my heart as no other man dead or alive has seen it, you would grant me now out of your great magnanimity. Oh, I understand you, Norman Scott, and this is my answer: Leave the house! Go! Find out the truth if you can. And, when you know it—if ever the day comes when you know all—remember my words and my prayer to you.’

I look at her steadfastly for a moment, at her pale, scornful face, and clear, angry eyes. I mark the evenness of her tone, and I am forced to admire the commanding grace and dignity of her attitude, and the gesture with which she dismisses me. Then I

turn away, and passing through the servants' hall unmolested, step out into the night. A great weight has been rolled away from me. There is no guilt in her face, nor any sign of weakness in her scornful rejection of my proposal. The future is still mine to mould and fashion with a free hand. The only obstacle which could stay me has been removed. I shall still work out my destiny.

CHAPTER XIII.

MADemoisELLE HORTENSE'S ADVERTISEMENT.

THIS morning Mademoiselle Hortense's advertisement appeared in the *Daily Telegraph*. As soon as I have assured myself of the fact, I write out a telegram on one of the pink delivery forms :

'To A. C. X., Poste Restante, Market Deignton.

'N. S. is in London, and will meet you anywhere and any day this week. Reply by wire only, care of Gregson, 112, Great Marlborough Street.'

There is no Gregson at 112, Great Marlborough Street, to my knowledge, but the address is useless and may serve as a blind. The telegram in reply will be handed to me to forward, and in my possession it will remain.

I do not expect Mademoiselle Hortense before to-morrow at the earliest ; but at twelve o'clock, to

my surprise, she walks into the shop. I happen to be mixing some drugs with my back turned to the street, and have seen her approach only through the mirror. David is in attendance behind the counter. She buys some lozenges and is about to depart. As she gathers up her change, however, I hear her ask a question :

‘Have you a letter for me addressed A. C. X.? But no, it is too soon yet.’

I turn round for the first time.

‘There is a telegram for A. C. X., David,’ I say ; ‘it is on my desk.’

She receives it quite calmly, and, with it in her hand, would have lingered to talk with me. But I nod somewhat curtly, and go back to my place behind the desk. I do not wish Mademoiselle to see too much of me to-day. At the same time, I am disappointed when I see her leave the shop without opening the telegram.

In about two hours she returns, and, as I do not happen to be in the shop, she leaves a telegram with David in a sealed envelope. I tear it open, and read :

‘I will meet you at Dubarri’s restaurant, Regent Street, at half-past one on Wednesday.’

I wait till David is out of the way, and then I tear the message carefully up. During the afternoon I write a brief reply :

‘I shall be there.’

So far I have done well. I have preserved my

incognito, and I have arranged the meeting. How I am to get to London I have yet to consider.

The rest of the day passes somewhat wearily. After the excitement of last night and the prospect of to-morrow's journey, the hours which I am compelled to spend in the fulfilment of my small duties seem more than ever tedious. Towards closing-time a telegram arrives which I take down without special interest:

'To Lady Deignton, Deignton Court.

'Arrived in Liverpool yesterday. Hope to reach you on Saturday.

'CALLENDER, Hotel Victoria.'

I take it that this is some connection of her ladyship, and after sending David off with the message, I think no more about it. But soon after he has returned, and is busy carrying out the shutters, a groom from the Court comes riding down the street, and seeing me outside—I have stepped on to the pavement for a breath of fresh air—pulls up. It has been showery most of the afternoon, and is just commencing to rain again.

'Good-evening, sir,' he says.

'Good-evening,' I reply.

'It don't make no difference in the time, does it, if a telegram is sent off from here or from Mitford?' he inquires, looking round at the gathering clouds.

'None at all,' I tell him. 'If you have to ride to Mitford with one, it will go much quicker from here. In fact, it would reach its destination before you got to Mitford.'

His hand goes round to the wallet which is slung around his shoulders, and he produces a piece of paper. I can see that it is a telegraph form.

'I've got a telegram here,' he says, 'and the message was that I was to take it to Mitford. I don't see any blooming use in going on there and getting wet through, when it would go just as well from here.'

'Give it to me, and I'll send it for you, then,' I say, holding out my hand. 'I dare say they thought the office here was closed. It is after hours really, but I'll send it for this once.'

'Why, that's it, no doubt,' he says, giving it into my hand. 'I am much obliged, sir. Glad I thought of asking you. Good-evening.'

He canters his horse across the square, and disappears under the broad archway of the Deighton Arms. I take the message into the office, and after reading it carefully, despatch it. It is

'To Callender, Hotel Victoria, Northumberland Avenue, London.

'Do not come. Am writing.

'C. DEIGHTON.'

The message tells me nothing, but, all the same, I feel that it has a certain significance. There could be only one reason for the man's instructions. For some cause or other Lady Deighton did not wish it to pass through my hands. I have never heard the name of Callender; but in my mind I put down a black mark against it.

Just as I have finished with the instrument, I hear

light footsteps pause outside the closed shop-door, and then a hesitating tap. I throw it open, and behold—Mademoiselle Hortense.

‘I am sorry to come so late,’ she says, with an apologetic smile which shows all her white teeth. ‘Have you a time-table?’

‘If you will step into the shop, I will see,’ I answer.

Mademoiselle Hortense does so. I go into the back parlour and bring out one which lies open upon the table there, for I, too, have been consulting it.

‘I find that I have only my own left,’ I say; ‘but if you will tell me where you want to go to, I will write down the trains for you.’

‘It is to London.’

‘Morning or afternoon?’

‘Morning, please.’

‘There is a train at ten o’clock, which arrives at Waterloo at 12.50,’ I say. ‘Will that do?’

‘Very nicely; indeed, thank you. Perhaps I had better take down the times of the others—if there are any, though.’

‘There is no other fast train,’ I say decidedly. ‘The ten o’clock from Mitford is the only morning express.’

‘Thank you very much, Mr. Martin,’ she says, rising. ‘I am afraid that you must be weary to see me. It is the third time to-day.’

I make some courteous, indefinite answer, and bow her out. Things are going well with me to-day. It is true that I have been compelled to see Mademoiselle

Hortense three times ; but I have been on my guard, and I have been able to keep my voice disguised and my face in the shadow. And, on the other hand, my last real difficulty with regard to to-morrow has disappeared. I know by what train Mademoiselle Hortense intends to travel. She will go by the ten o'clock ; I shall catch the 9.10.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT DUBARRI'S RESTAURANT.

BACK once more in London ; once more a unit in this great wheel of humanity. After my weary months of contemplative idleness, the roar and excitement of the great city is like the scent of battle to a pensioned charger. I discover now what I have for long dimly suspected. I am pining to find myself once more in the press and struggle of men, to breathe once more the intellectual air of cultivated London. As I walked down Pall Mall and Regent Street a few minutes ago, I saw many faces I knew. I have received one or two half-startled recognitions. A great physician tried to stop his carriage in St. James's ; and I even heard my name shouted from a club window by a man who sought to stop me. But to all these things I have chosen to remain both deaf and blind. I am in no way disguised. I am Dr. Norman Scott, and I do not suppose that the inside of a couple of years has made a great difference in

my appearance. But I have made up my mind that for the present I will neither claim nor acknowledge any acquaintance with those who are of my former life. I will spare them all the trouble of making up their minds whether or no I am to receive notice at their hands. There shall be no cause for embarrassment on their part so far as I am concerned. One day I hope to walk these pavements a free man. Then I shall bear no ill-will to any man. Then all will be welcome who choose to come to me. I shall have no individual slights or looks of doubt to remember. It is much better so. And at the thought of that day my heart swells, and my eyes grow dim. Nature never meant me for a recluse; the air of a great city is like a strong stimulant to me. I look into the faces of the men and the women who throng past me with an interest which is almost childish. Only when I see a face which in any way strikes me as familiar do I keep my eyes averted and my head erect.

I make two calls on my way to Dubarri's restaurant. I go into Scott's and have my hat ironed, and I buy a carnation of my favourite colour for my coat. It is still only a few minutes past one when I reach my destination, and select a small table in the darkest corner of the room facing the door. There I sit and watch for Mademoiselle Hortense.

I am not in the least afraid of recognition. The change in my appearance is, I feel, quite sufficient. I have brought up from Market Deignton some relics of the other part of my life, consisting of a frock-coat, made by a fashionable tailor, and a tall hat, neither,

so far as I can see, very much out of date. My boots, too, are of a different style to those I have worn lately, and my Dent's gloves have not seen the light in Market Deignton. Then, my false hair—have I ever confessed that my hair is false?—has gone, and also my glasses. My complexion is no longer reddish, but decidedly dark; and my heavy double spectacles have been replaced by a single eyeglass. I have just looked at myself in the mirror yonder, and I am perfectly satisfied. Mademoiselle Hortense may be an observant woman, but she will not recognise in me the postmaster and chemist of Market Deignton.

It is early for luncheon, but my breakfast this morning was little more than a pretence, and I am not sorry to see the dish of cutlets which I had ordered on taking my seat. I commence my luncheon and eat with an excellent appetite. I am not quite sure whether Mademoiselle Hortense is proposing to do me the honour of lunching with me, but in that case I am quite capable of eating more cutlets; and I can explain that I could scarcely occupy the table without ordering something.

The restaurant itself is just such as a woman would choose. There is a large confectioner's shop on the front, separated from this room by a green wooden partitioning and glass doors. Every time one of them is opened the roar of Regent Street sounds in my ears, bringing with it, after my long retreat, a curious sense of novelty. Every time it is opened I glance up expecting to see Mademoiselle Hortense.

I am lingering over my last glass of claret, when

the door opens, and a girl dressed in black, and thickly veiled, enters and pauses on the threshold. The *menu*, which I have been affecting to study, slips from my suddenly nerveless fingers and flutters on to the ground. My eyes are riveted upon the slim, elegant figure of the girl who is glancing around the room with admirable nonchalance. It is not Mademoiselle Hortense ; but it is, nevertheless, an equally familiar figure. Am I dreaming, I wonder, or——

I half rise from my seat, and her eyes in the course of their wandering round the room reach me at last. She does not hesitate or look twice. She advances steadily towards me, and in a moment we are face to face. I stand out from my place and bow to her in a dazed manner.

‘You are the lady who advertised for Dr. Norman Scott?’ I remark in a low tone, more in the form of a greeting than an inquiry ; and she answers me with a slight inclination of the head and a conventional smile. Then I place for her the chair opposite to my own, and we sit down and look at one another like a pair of conspirators.

‘I am Dr. Norman Scott,’ I say simply, ‘and I am here in answer to your advertisement. It is very good of you to try and help such an unfortunate person as myself.’

Then, at last, she raises her veil fully, and I know that my first instinct of recognition was a truthful one. The girl who sits facing me is Sir Humphrey Deignton’s daughter.

CHAPTER XV.

A COMPACT SEALED.

EARLY in life the routine of my profession taught me to be naturally self-possessed and self-controlled. Both qualities stand me in good stead now. I grasp the situation swiftly. Mademoiselle Hortense has been merely the messenger. It is this girl who inserted the advertisement, and up to now I am unrecognised. Good! I must take care that I remain so, at any rate for the present.

‘Can I offer you any lunch?’ I say as pleasantly as possible.

She shakes her head; but I insist:

‘At least, have a glass of wine and some sandwiches. It will look irregular if you have nothing, and at these places there are always people who notice.’

She lets me order some soup and sandwiches and sherry. Her first reserve is passing away. She even looks around her with some satisfaction.

‘You could not have chosen a better place,’ she remarks. ‘How dark it is in this corner! Dr. Scott, I am going to commence to talk to you at once whilst the tables around us are empty.’

‘I am quite ready.’

‘First of all, then, do you know who I am?’

‘Yes; you are Miss Deignton.’

She looks a little surprised.

‘How did you know?’ she asks.

‘The likeness to Sir Humphrey is quite sufficient,’ I answer gravely.

She bows her head.

‘Very well, then. You can imagine, of course, from the fact that I am here at all that I believe you innocent of my father’s death.’

‘And God knows I am grateful to you for that belief,’ I murmur fervently.

She continues without heeding my interruption :

‘I knew you at once, from the photograph which my father had in his study, and, besides, I have seen you before. I have often heard him speak of your father and you ; and if I had not been educated wholly abroad, I dare say we should have met. When I left school my father’s second marriage was not pleasing to me—I am speaking very frankly, you see—and I preferred not to live at home.’

We are interrupted here by the waiter with the soup. She takes a few spoonfuls and then recommences :

‘I have mentioned my father’s marriage. While I am speaking about it I should like to ask you a question : Do you know who Lady Deignton was ?’

‘No. I only know that she was born in France.’

‘She was a governess at a house I used to visit at abroad. Sir Humphrey met her there when he came to see me. Her father was an Englishman, I believe, and no doubt she was perfectly respectable and all that ; but I did not like her as a governess, and naturally liked her less as my father’s wife. Still, that did not make me any the less fond of my father, and when that awful news reached me I nearly went mad. Afterwards, when I had recovered from the

shock a little, I believe that only one thing saved me. Can you imagine what that was?’

I look at her mouth, which has suddenly hardened, and I divine the truth.

‘It is that you desire to see his murderer brought to justice.’

‘Yes. At first, I admit that I thought it was you. I was at the inquest, although you did not see me, and I listened to every word of your evidence with my eyes fixed upon your face. The conclusion I came to then I have never wavered from. I decided that you were innocent.’

‘Thank God for it!’ I say in a low tone, and looking gratefully at her. ‘Those are the kindest words I have heard from anyone since the—event. Forgive me for interrupting you : I was forgetting.’

I am in danger of losing a little of my self-control. Through that thick net veil I can see a pair of grave eyes which seem to speak to me of sympathy.

‘I was sorry for you then,’ she says simply, ‘and I have been sorry for you ever since. But, you see, I did not know you, and there was something stronger in my heart than sympathy for anyone. It was the desire to know who was the guilty person.’

She glances around, fearing lest the earnestness of our conversation may make us an object of curiosity. No one appears to be taking the slightest notice of us ; but she finishes her soup before resuming the subject, and I make a few idle remarks about the shops, the weather, anything. The waiter removes the soup, and brings the sandwiches and some sweet

things which I had ordered. Then she leans over towards me again.

‘One thing seemed to me very certain,’ she continues, ‘and that was, that if the key to the mystery was anywhere, it was at Market Deignton. Accordingly, I waited for several months after the funeral, and then I wrote to my stepmother, proposing to come and stay at Deignton Court for awhile. She replied at once, putting me off almost as though I were a stranger. I tried again, with the same result. About a fortnight ago I wrote once more. This time she actually telegraphed me not to come; but through a mistake in the transmission of the message it read “come,” and in twenty-four hours I was at Deignton Court. Lady Deignton received me calmly, but at the same time I could see that she was very angry. Still, I am there, and I mean to stay there for the present.’

‘And you have discovered——?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Ah!’ I toy with my wine-glass, and hide my disappointment under a frown.

‘But at the same time I have my suspicions,’ she continues cautiously.

‘Since how long?’

‘Since the day of the inquest.’

‘And had you any ground for them at all?’

‘None at first. You know what a woman relies on more than a man in such cases.’

‘Impressions?’

‘Instinct.’

I nod. For some reason or other I seem to have faith in this girl's instinct.

'You say that you have had a suspicion since the inquest,' I say in a low tone. 'Since then, has it become strengthened?'

'Day by day.'

'Has it grown towards proof?'

'No; I have nothing in the shape of proof or tangible evidence to give you. I take it that you are still anxious to prove your innocence.'

I laugh a little bitterly.

'Until I prove it I am an alien, friendless and homeless. I have neither name nor any man's regard. I would give twenty years of my life to prove it. I would give my whole life.'

'I thought that you would feel so,' she answers softly.

I would like to look into her eyes, but they are fixed upon her plate.

'I knew that you must feel so,' she repeats, still without looking up. 'That is why I decided to see you if I could. The same end is dear to both of us. We may be able to help one another.'

The moment has come for my question. I put it, and my heart beats fast in the silence which ensues before she answers me.

'Whom do you suspect?'

We have been talking in a low tone. Now our voices have sunk to a whisper, and our heads nearly touch across the table. At that moment, intense as its interest is to me, I notice everything. I notice that her voice, low though it is, is clear and unfaltering.

I notice, too, that her eyes are closely watching me. She is anxious to see what effect her words have.

‘My stepmother.’

‘Lady Deignton?’

‘Yes; Lady Deignton.’

The figures in the restaurant have suddenly become to me like figures in a dream, dimly seen through a mist which seems to fill the room. The mist is in my eyes, and there is a loud humming in my ears. Bah! it is over. I draw a long breath. The colour is in my cheeks once more.

‘And have you any grounds at all?’ I ask with what seems to me wonderful calmness.

She assents. ‘Yes. I should hesitate to tell you this—to be here at all, knowing that once you and my stepmother were great friends, if the stake were less. But I am going to ask you to tell me this honestly: Is your regard for Lady Deignton such that you would hesitate to clear yourself at her cost, should you be satisfied that she is guilty? If so, why, our ways lie apart, and I shall rely upon your honour to forget that this meeting has ever taken place.’

I do not hesitate. Lady Deignton has had her chance from me. Only one thing is clear to me through all this.

‘I want justice,’ I say firmly, ‘and it is just that the guilty should suffer, not the innocent. If it be she, well, I do not think that I should spare her.’

She is satisfied. I can see that she does not believe the evil that has been said concerning Lady Deignton and myself. For that, too, I am thankful.

‘I was sure that you would feel so. Any man would. I want to be quite frank with you,’ she continues, ‘and I am going to tell you every little thing that I have noticed since I came to Deignton Court. They may not seem much to you at first. Afterwards they may come to mean more.’

‘Let me judge for myself,’ I say.

‘First of all, then, did you know a servant at the Court named Mason?’

I am getting used to control myself. I only shake my head. After all, it may be a coincidence that this is the name of my mysterious housekeeper.

‘Well, there was one. Immediately after my father’s death he disappeared. Then came the news that he was dead—had died at some relative’s in a neighbouring county. His wife came back to Market Deignton, dressed in deepest mourning, and calls herself a widow. But only a few nights ago he came to the Court, unknown to the servants, and was with Lady Deignton for an hour. I will tell you about it. It was after dinner, in the drawing-room one night, and she and I were alone. Suddenly I heard what seemed to me to be a twig beating against the window, and I chanced to look at Lady Deignton to see whether she, too, had noticed it. She was horribly pale, and had risen to her feet, with her eyes fixed upon the window. I looked down at my book and pretended to go on reading. In a moment she spoke to me:

“Katherine, I wish you would go and make out that list of books we were speaking of in the

library. I shall want it to-morrow morning,"' she said.

'I rose at once and left the room, but only to enter the blue drawing-room by another door. From behind the curtains I saw my stepmother unfasten the French window, and a man stepped into the room. He had a woollen comforter wrapped round the lower part of his face, but when he began to speak it slipped, and I saw him distinctly. It was Mason.'

'Could you hear what they were saying?' I ask quickly.

'Only a single sentence of Mason's. These are the words: "If it were anything but murder, and my poor dear master—God have mercy upon us all!"

'Then I heard him speak threateningly to Lady Deignton, and I saw her give him money, and push him towards the window, trying to get rid of him. Just as he was going I slipped away quietly into the library.'

'You have discovered a clue, more than a clue. Mason must be found. I remember they said that he was ill at the inquest, and would probably die.'

'Yes, it is a clue,' she echoes thoughtfully. 'There is nothing else definite. Only I watch my stepmother closely, and I can see that she lives in a constant state of dread day and night. Once she woke up and aroused the whole house with her shrieks. I was first in the room—I have chosen one close to hers—and I found her sitting up in bed with her face

palsied with horror, and her hands stretched out as though to keep something away from her. It was a nightmare, she declared. But she has had it more than once. I have seen her when she thought herself alone, and I have been almost terrified myself at her face. When I look at it I cease to doubt any longer. I say to myself that this is surely the face of a guilty woman.'

She ceases talking, and pours herself out a glass of water. I watch her mechanically, my idle eyes taking note of her long slim fingers and delicate wrist. I seem to have suddenly become the tenant of an unreal world. I have lost hold even upon my sensations. I myself am drifting upon a sea which I cannot fathom. I think of the days when a flush stole into my cheeks and my heart beat guiltily when Cora Deighton and I found ourselves in the same room. I remember the swift lightning glances with which she would welcome me, the dances we sat out together, the frantic haste with which I would attack my day's work, that I might steal one brief hour from the afternoon to lounge in her cool, dainty little boudoir, whilst she denied herself to all comers, and gave me wonderful little cups of tea, and we talked of all things under the sun. As a rule, our talk was harmless enough. Only once did we draw near to that line beyond which was dishonour. Even now I shiver to think of it, for we seemed to have drifted to the very border. I can see her at this instant, her soft, brilliant eyes gleaming at me from the depths of the great lounge where she was sitting, and her arms

suddenly stretched out towards me. What was it that saved us, that gave me one instant's respite in which to consider that she was the wife of my father's friend—a bell, or a caller?—some trifle, I know. I remember dismissing the carriage and walking home in the twilight across the park, with my pulses and heart all aglow, and thanking God who had kept me from the hell of such dishonour. It is true that she tempted me, tempted me day by day. Am I becoming a coward to shelter myself behind that? Mine was the fault, the bitter, grievous fault, and verily I have borne the burden. Yet, thank God that the evil of those days is dead! Their false sweetness troubles me no longer. The memory of them is like ashes between my teeth. Their temptation is for everlasting dead. I can think of the woman who so nearly led me captive with only a shudder. She has had all the grace I owe her. She must take her chance now.

My dream is over. My companion's voice has brought me back to the present. I find that she is putting on her gloves.

'It is time for me to go,' she says quietly. 'Have you been thinking over what to do?'

'Partly,' I answer. 'The man Mason must be found. I—I am coming down to Market Deignton.'

'As Dr. Norman Scott?'

I look at her closely. No, she has no suspicion. I will keep my secret for a little longer.

'No, in another character. I shall not fail to introduce myself.'

We have both risen. She hesitates for a moment and then puts out her hand.

‘You had better give me your address,’ she suggests.

I take out a card and scribble upon it. After a moment’s consideration, however, I tear it up.

‘Post-office, Market Deighton,’ I say.

She smiles. ‘You are going to lose no time,’ she remarks.

‘There is no time to lose,’ I answer gravely. ‘Can I do anything for you?’

‘You can put me in a cab,’ she says. ‘I am spending the day with some friends at Kensington.’

So we pass out on to the pavement together, and I call a hansom. As it draws up I look her in the face.

‘I cannot thank you yet, Miss Deighton,’ I say earnestly. ‘You have done a brave, womanly thing, and if I succeed in winning my way back into life, it will be through you.’

‘I have done what I thought right,’ she answers, looking away for a moment. ‘We shall see. Good-bye.’

I hand her into the cab, and she gives me a little smile and nod as it drives away. Then I hurry back to a small hotel near the Strand, change all my things, and before seven o’clock the postmaster of Market Deighton is behind the counter sorting the letters.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT DID HE SEE ?

AT three o'clock on the following afternoon I am in the shop to receive the second mails from Mitford Junction. They are brought to me for distribution in a sealed leather bag by a gray-haired old man whom the villagers know only by the name of Crazy Jack. My duty is then to sort them into two batches—one for the town of Market Deighton, with which David takes a leisurely promenade; the other is handed back to Crazy Jack, who carries it on to Little Deighton and the Court. This performance we go through twice a day.

This afternoon, as I am tying up the few Little Deighton letters, I am suddenly conscious of a touch on the wrist. Crazy Jack is leaning across the narrow counter, with his wizened features strangely contorted, and a frightened gleam in his bleared blue eyes.

'Is there no' ane there for th' White House, Muster Martin?' he asks eagerly.

'I didn't notice,' I answer. 'I thought so.'

He pushes the little pile back towards me. 'Do 'ee see,' he begs.

I look at him, surprised at his strange appearance. No wonder they call him Crazy Jack. It is little trouble to humour him, though. Near the bottom I pause.

'Yes; there is one there for Mr. Callender, the White House,' I say, keeping my forefinger upon it.

‘Aren’t you well this morning, Jack? You look as though you wanted some medicine.’

‘Take it out and put it by for the morning, sir,’ he begs in a hoarse whisper. ‘I’ll na take it noo.’

‘Why not?’ I ask. ‘It is not far out of your way if you go across the park, and the letter must go.’

The horny knotted hand resting upon the counter is shaking. The man must certainly be ill.

‘Muster Martin,’ he says, with a certain rugged emphasis in his tone which is not without its effect upon me, ‘if tha will, tha canst turn me off, and my poor old mother’ll starve or go t’ workus. I’ll no be able to keep her, for there’s no other job I’m fit for but this, and if I lose it there’s nowt else. But take that letter till morning, I can’t, so theer—I can’t.’

‘Give me a reason, Jack,’ I say quietly. ‘I don’t want to be hard on you.’

‘I be afeard.’

‘Afraid!’ I repeat. ‘Afraid of what?’

‘That I can’t tell ’ee. But I’ll no’ go across the park to t’ White House in the dusk.’

‘You’re a silly fellow, Jack,’ I exclaim impatiently. ‘A grown man like you to have such fancies!’

He draws himself up with a sudden movement. He is standing now in the track of a stray gleam of sunlight, and I am conscious of a certain rustic and homely dignity in his bearing.

‘Muster Martin, you ha’ noticed, like all these other folk who call me Crazy Jack, that there be something queer about me. I be an’t like other men, quite, eh?’

‘Not exactly, Jack,’ I answer, after a moment’s hesitation.

‘No, I bean’t, and that’s the truth,’ he admits, shaking his head sorrowfully. ‘I was all right until I seed summat in Deignton Park, near t’ White House,’ he adds, his voice sinking almost to a whisper. ‘It killed the mon in me. It made me what I be, poor, daft, Crazy Jack. I’ll no’ go there save in the sun-light, and then in fear and trembling. I’ll no’ do it for the Queen upon her throne!’

I glance at the letter in perplexity. It is evidently of no importance—a catalogue of a sale of farming-stock, as its outside testifies, for Mr. Callender or occupier. I know nothing of the tenant of the White House save that he is an invalid, and presumably very unlikely to be interested in a catalogue such as this, probably directed at random by some auctioneer’s clerk. At any rate, I fail in my duty to Her Majesty, and I withdraw the letter.

‘Very well, Jack,’ I say; ‘you shall take it in the morning.’

His bleared eyes are full of tears; he is not too crazy to know what gratitude means.

‘And I’ll no’ lose my place, Mr. Martin, sir?’ he asks eagerly.

‘No, Jack; I’ll see to that.’

‘The Lord bless ’ee, sir! I knows a gentleman when I sees ’im, Crazy Jack does, and you be one. The Lord bless ’ee, sir! The Lord bless ’ee!’

He hurries away with his satchel slung over his shoulder, drawing his ragged sleeve across his eyes,

and I watch him partly in curiosity, partly in pity. Outside on the pavement he pauses once more, waves his hand to me with a semi-theatric gesture, and hobbles away across the market-place—a curious, bent-up figure, physically and mentally deformed, but with heart enough left to appreciate a trifling act of kindness.

‘Poor fellow!’ I say softly.

David, who is sorting his own pile of letters busily at the back of the shop, looks up and pauses in his task.

‘He’d never have gone to the White House, sir; he can’t pass along the lane that skirts the park without shivering and muttering to himself. At first he used to give a little boy a farthing to walk with him, but he’s got a bit better since then.’

‘Did he have an accident there, or is it a ghost-walk?’ I ask, without feeling any special interest in the matter.

David looks up at me, and stops sorting his letters; his ruddy round face has caught a gleam of Crazy Jack’s fear.

‘He saw something crossing the park, sir. No one has ever been able to get him to say what it was, though there’s no end have had a try. He shakes all over, and nearly has a fit when it is mentioned.’

‘Foolish fellow! And do the people hereabouts really believe that he saw anything, then?’

‘I don’t know that they do exactly believe it, sir; you see, he’s always been rather queer in the head.

But there's just one thing that makes it rather strange.'

'And what is that?' I ask, turning away to enter my room.

David's voice has sunk almost as low as Crazy Jack's. He is going to speak of a matter which no one in Market Deignton can mention save in hushed tones.

'It was the night of the murder at Deignton Court, sir.'

CHAPTER XVII.

A WOMAN OF MYSTERIES.

So far from things concerning the event becoming more clear to me since my arrival at Market Deignton, every day seems to weave an additional web of mystery around it, and to plunge me into deeper bewilderment. There is no doubt about it: I am in a complete fog. I cannot tell which way to turn, or, rather, to grope; and there are still three long days before Sunday—three intolerable, dreary days.

Since yesterday, Mrs. Mason, at whom I have scarcely glanced since I first engaged her on the day of my arrival here, at the recommendation of Mrs. Holmes, has become an object of interest to me. She is reputed to be, and describes herself as being, a widow. Yet, according to Miss Deignton, her husband is mysteriously alive. Now I think of it, the very day on which Mason paid his secret visit to

Deighton Court was the day on which she was so mysteriously ill. Was she in the secret before, or did she know of it on that day for the first time? How much does she know, I wonder? Does she really carry the whole drama of that night, the key to the mystery which my life is pledged to solve, behind that gray, worn face and correctly-reserved deportment?

Work for the day is over, and my mind is free to wander on its own account. I lounge back in my easy-chair, and watch Mrs. Mason as she prepares my evening meal. Is it possible that that smooth-fingered, neat little woman carries in her heart the knowledge which would set me free? If I should suddenly shut the door and point a revolver at her heart, should I force her to yield it up to me, I wonder? I fancy not. I do not think that Mrs. Mason is an ordinary woman, by any means, nor do I think that she is a woman whom it would be easy to terrify. I am going to put her to the test a little; I am going to ask her a question, and watch her.

‘Mrs. Mason.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I thought I understood from you that you were a widow?’

I have sunk low down in my easy-chair, and have pushed it back into a gloomy corner. Mrs. Mason at the moment of my question is standing where the firelight falls upon her face. My diplomacy in effecting this little arrangement is rewarded. She gives a quick, convulsive start, and half closes her eyes, as

though to escape from the sight of some threatened blow. The gesture or paroxysm lasts about three seconds ; and had she not been standing well in the light of the dancing flames, I could have seen none of it. She answers me quietly and without emotion :

‘Yes, sir. My husband has been dead some little time.’

‘Oh, I beg your pardon,’ I answer, rising and taking my place at the table. ‘Bring me the Worcester sauce, Mrs. Mason, please.’

She brings it me and sets it down. I notice that her fingers are shaking. She hesitates, and then leaves the room. Presently she comes in again on some pretext or other.

‘Do you require anything else, sir?’

‘Nothing else, Mrs. Mason.’

Again there is a trifling hesitation. It does not lead to anything, however. She leaves the room without speaking.

After I have finished, I ring for her to clear away. Then I bury myself in the easy-chair, with my feet upon the fender, and affect to be deeply interested in the first book which had chanced to come to hand.

Once or twice I steal a glance at her. There is an ashen shade in her pale face, and a slight nervousness in her movements quite foreign to her usual manner. These things I note, and continue reading.

She has quite finished now, but she does not go. Presently I hear her voice, and glancing up, see that she is standing by my side.

‘I beg your pardon, sir.’

‘What is it, Mrs. Mason? Do you want some money?’

‘No, sir, thank you. You—asked me a question just now.’

‘Did I? What was it? About the mushrooms?’

‘No, sir; about my husband.’

I lay my book down. ‘I am sorry if it distressed you, Mrs. Mason.’

‘It wasn’t that, sir. But may I ask—had you any reason for asking it?’

‘No particular reason, Mrs. Mason. I fancied, for the moment, I had heard someone mention your husband, that is all. It must be a mistake.’

‘It is a mistake, sir.’

‘Of course. I don’t doubt that, Mrs. Mason; I’m only sorry I mentioned it.’

‘I hope you’ll forgive me, sir, for seeming inquisitive, but you don’t happen to remember when you heard——’

‘I couldn’t have heard it at all, could I, Mrs. Mason?’ I interrupt. ‘It must have been my fancy.’

She is sorely troubled, I can see, and my answers do not altogether satisfy her; yet she can say no more.

‘Thank you, sir. Good-night, sir.’

‘Good-night, Mrs. Mason.’

She leaves the room, a prim, black-gowned little woman, whose outer husk, at any rate, speaks of staid and commonplace respectability. Yet, somehow, I am beginning to feel a conviction that she is one of those whose tongue could, if she chose, set me free

from my bondage. At any rate, she has her inner and her outer life, and the secret of the former is connected by some means, and in some fashion, with the 'event.' In what fashion, and how closely, it is my task to discover.

I am beginning to find myself in the position of a man who has a lot of threads before his hands, but who has no means of discovering which one will help him to unravel the tangled skein. I have had a pull at one this evening. Now I will leave it alone and try another.

I light my pipe, and walk up and down my little room for half a dozen times. Then, after a little hesitation, I do what I have not yet done since my arrival at Market Deignton: I put on my cap, lock the door, and cross the way to Mr. Holmes's shop.

I inquire for Mr. Holmes, and am shown at once into the bosom of the family. Mr. Holmes is reclining in a high-backed chair drawn up to the fire, reading extracts from last Saturday's paper aloud to the partner of his domestic joys, who sits facing him with a baby in her arms and a pile of stockings by her side. There are several children about the room, and a young lady of about fourteen is sitting at a worn piano playing scales.

I am received with some surprise. Mr. Holmes stands up with the paper still in his hands, and greets me with mild affability. Mrs. Holmes deposits the baby in a cot, and, shaking out her gown, affords me the privilege of grasping a large warm hand. The rule of opposites is well observed here. Mr. Holmes is a

small, thin man, clad in black, and much resembling an undertaker in a small way of business. Mrs. Holmes is large, and a little coarse and flabby. At the same time, she is hospitable and even cordial.

‘Come to have a chat and a pipe, I hope, eh?’ remarks Mr. Holmes. ‘We were saying, me and the missus was, only last week, that, considering we’re neighbours, we don’t see much of you—weren’t we, Mrs. H.? Willie, give Mr. Martin that chair, and, Maria, do leave off those scales for a few moments!’

‘It’s very good of you,’ I say, taking the chair which Willie has vacated on my behalf. ‘I came in really with a message for David. I want him to get over a quarter of an hour earlier than usual to-morrow. It is possible that the inspector may be round.’

‘We’ll tell him when he comes in, for sure,’ Mr. Holmes declares. ‘Now you’re here, you’ll stop a bit, won’t you? I’d like to have a bit o’ chat with you about David. Is he sharp—quick at his work, eh?’

I am glad to be able to report that I find David in every way equal to his work. Mr. Holmes is pleased, and commences a few reminiscences of his own start in life, to which I listen with forced blandness.

‘Perhaps Mr. Martin is fond of music,’ Mrs. Holmes remarks, breaking ruthlessly into her husband’s recollections. ‘Maria, my dear.’

The signal is not one to be disobeyed. I suffer in silence, but the torture of the ‘War March of the Priests,’ played with a reckless disregard of time or

sharps, upon a worn-out piano, which seems never to have known the tuner's hand, hastens on my mission. Besides, Mrs. Holmes, evidently on hospitable thoughts intent, has left the room, and in the kitchen behind I can hear the clatter of plates and glasses.

'I sent out a letter to-day,' I remark, 'to a name I have never heard before. Rather curious, considering that he must live within a few miles of here.'

Mr. Holmes is a great gossip, and he is interested at once.

'Who was it?' he asks; 'I back I know him.'

I knit my brows and look into the fire.

'Let me see, the address was "The White House."'

Mr. Holmes's interest grows.

'The name was Callender, then?'

'So it was. Callender—that was it. Who is he?'

'If you'll believe me,' Mr. Holmes declares, sitting forward with his hands upon his knees, 'I've not set eyes upon him half a dozen times in my life.'

'A new-comer, I suppose?'

'Nothing of the sort. Been here four years, if he's been here a day.'

My interest in Mr. Callender suddenly fades away. I continue the conversation without any special motive.

'That's odd, isn't it?' I remark.

Mr. Holmes wags his head.

'He's quite an old gentleman, I believe. Very seldom goes out. Chronic invalid. He started to go

to Cairo for the winter some time ago, but when he got to London he was afraid he wouldn't stand the journey, and came back again.'

'And when was that?' I ask.

Mr. Holmes looks solemn. There comes into his face just that look which I have noticed in the countenance of all the Market Deignton folk when any allusion is made to a certain event.

'He left the White House only the day before the murder of Sir Humphrey by that doctor fellow,' he says gravely.

I do not remonstrate with Mr. Holmes. After all, is not his conclusion the conclusion of all? Besides, my thoughts are fully engrossed. Just then Mrs. Holmes comes bustling into the room.

'You'll take a bit of supper with us, Mr. Martin? It's all ready upon the table.'

I am constrained to accept her invitation. Under the circumstances, it would not be well for me to take my departure just as I have come into possession of the knowledge which I came to seek.

I sit between Mrs. Holmes and her fourteen-year-old daughter, and, despite my own recent dinner, I am quite equal to attacking a well-cooked rasher of bacon and an egg. Mr. Holmes, in high good-humour at the fare, which I fancy that my presence is responsible for, beams genially upon his better half and around the table.

'We've been talking about poor old Mr. Callender, my dear,' he remarks.

'Not much to talk about, I should fancy,' Mrs.

Holmes answers, filling my glass with beer. 'He's a poor miserable creature, by all accounts.'

'So I've been hearing, Mrs. Holmes. I had scarcely ever heard his name. By the way, whereabouts is the White House?' I inquire, glad to have the opportunity of renewing the subject without the onus of introducing it.

'Why, it's inside the park, to the left as you go in from the village, and about half a mile from the Court,' Mrs. Holmes explains. 'It's what they call the old dower-house of the Deigntons.'

'Then, I suppose Mr. Callender is related to the family?'

'He is a connection either of poor Sir Humphrey's or Lady Deignton's; I don't rightly know which,' Mr. Holmes confesses; 'I have heard, too.'

'An old house?' I ask.

'About two hundred years,' Mr. Holmes thinks. Mrs. Holmes believes that it is older.

'Then, of course, it has its family ghost?'

Mr. and Mrs. Holmes exchange glances.

'So Crazy Jack says,' Mr. Holmes replies. His tone is by no means light. He evidently takes the matter seriously.

'Crazy Jack! Ah, yes, I've heard something about that. He wouldn't take a letter there this afternoon because it would be twilight. I had to put it away until to-morrow.'

'I don't know as I blame him,' Mr. Holmes declares solemnly. 'Of course, I know there's them as says that Jack's been a bit half-witted all his life, and he

ain't none too sharp anyhow ; but, all the same, he was a decent fellow enough until that night—the night after the murder at Deighton Court ; but I dare say you've heard the story, Mr. Martin ?'

I shake my head. 'I don't think so.'

'Well, he was taking a short-cut across the park, after delivering the letters at the house, on the night after the murder, and there, moving amongst the trees, he saw—something, nobody knows what. Anyhow, he was brought home here next morning, after having been out all night, with his hair turned gray and his wits crazed, and so he's been ever since. If anyone asks what happened to him, or what he saw, he shrieks like an idiot. No one has ever been able to get a word from him of what it was. But you see what he is now, and for my part I can't help thinking that there must have been some cause for such a break-down. Something he must have seen.'

'I wouldn't talk of such things before the children, John,' Mrs. Holmes remarks, frowning upon her spouse. 'See how scared they look. And I don't suppose an educated man like Mr. Martin, with all his book-learning, sets much store upon ghost-stories and such like.'

Mr. Holmes is obedient, and I am, or appear to be, indifferent. So the conversation drifts away, and presently, having smoked a pipe with Mr. Holmes, and listened to a vigorous exposition of his political opinions in a silence which he doubtless considers an acquiescent one, I make my escape.

Alone in my own little sanctum, I breathe a sigh

of relief and kick off my boots. Then I light a last pipe and sit down to think over the dying embers of my neglected fire. I have not evolved a single ray of light out of all the heterogeneous mass of information which I have acquired. On the contrary, I am confronted with a new puzzle. If Mr. Callender has been at the White House all this time, who was the Mr. Stephen Callender to whom Lady Deignton wired a few days ago 'not on any account to come to Deignton'?

CHAPTER XVIII.

'YOUR LIFE FOR MY SUFFERINGS.'

SUNDAY morning at last! Never has a day seemed so long in coming as this; but come it has, and at half-past ten, after a pleasant, leisurely walk from Market Deignton, I find myself seated upon an old stump in the second plantation between the Court and the church. My head is leaning back against a red-trunked pine, and through the little cloud of blue-gray cigarette smoke which hangs around me in the breathless air, I keep my eyes fixed upon the path above.

It is a wonderfully clear day for November. Up through the slim, leafless branches of the trees I can see patches of blue sky, and the sunshine is glancing upon the russet-brown undergrowth, and lies across the winding path. The air is positively motionless.

Every now and then a withered dead leaf comes fluttering to the ground to make thicker the damp spiky carpet which lies already upon the ground, and just now a rabbit went scurrying through the bushes, pausing for a moment and sitting up on his haunches to look at me in surprise with bright black eyes. But, save for these things, Nature seems to have fallen asleep.

It is one of those days which in their absolute quietude suggest a brief suspense of her laws of growth and decay. There is neither the busy stirring of spring, nor the murmurous, full-hearted content of summer, nor the winter sounds of wind and rain stripping the trees and howling over the land like a destroying angel. The earth lies exhausted after the violent storms and rain of the last week. Between the branches of the trees I can see long streaks of water, silver-blue in the sunshine, where the river has overflowed in the valley; and up on the hill yonder a great elm has snapped asunder, and half of it lies on the ground, whilst the jagged end, bark-stripped and branchless, lifts still a stubborn front.

Yet to-day the air is soft and motionless, and the sky is free from the suspicion of a cloud. The tops of the distant hills are wrapped in a soft white mist, hanging around them like gauzy draperies, and full of suggestions of the rounded green slopes which they nowhere completely hide. With my hands clasped behind my head, I take it all in, smoking languidly and waiting.

After all my constant glances, she is upon me

before I am aware of it. Her light footsteps fall absolutely noiseless upon the soft, oozing layers of decaying leaves, and it is her voice which gives me the first token of her approach.

‘Good-morning, Mr. Martin,’ she says pleasantly enough, but without slackening her pace, and with a slight intonation in her voice which seems intended to convey some surprise at seeing me here.

‘Good-morning, Miss Deignton,’ I reply, springing to my feet.

She half glances towards me, and I remove my cap and face her with a smile. As I had intended that she should, she recognises me. She drops her skirts from her left hand, and looks at me in swiftly comprehending surprise.

‘Dr. Scott!’ she exclaims. ‘Why, I thought that your voice sounded familiar the other day. Why did you not tell me then? and what is the meaning of this masquerading?’

‘It isn’t altogether masquerading,’ I answer, with a shade of bitterness in my tone. ‘The professions are barred to a man without a name, and I had to make a living somehow, you know. Just as I was wondering how to solve the problem, I chanced to see an advertisement in a paper I picked up somewhere of a chemist’s business for sale at Market Deignton, found that the post-office went with it, and suddenly realized that to come here—in some sort of disguise of course—was about the wisest thing to be done. It seemed an excellent opportunity, and I took it.’

‘I see. But you might have taken me into your

confidence on Wednesday, I think,' she says, looking at me with a shade of reproach in her clear gray eyes.

'I don't know why I did not,' I answer. 'Perhaps I was looking forward to surprise you.'

'You certainly have,' she says, looking me over carefully. 'You have nothing fresh to tell me, I suppose, since Wednesday?'

'Nothing,' I answer with a sigh. 'Nothing.'

We have reached the first gate, for somehow she has moved on, and I have found myself walking with her. Before us, a broad stretch of meadow-land leads to the smaller plantation, through the leafless trees of which we can see the gray spire of the village church, with its neat little cluster of red-tiled cottages nestling close around it. There is scarcely a breath of wind. The thin gray lines of smoke from the chimneys ascend straight into the sunlit air. Not a leaf stirs upon the trees. Beyond is a stretch of deep red-soiled ploughed land, and then the background of hills. We pass through the gate, and walk slowly across the meadow.

'I am like a man confined in an iron circle of mystery,' I say thoughtfully. 'I keep on striving to find an exit, and am continually coming upon new facts, but they none of them lead me out. I cannot connect them. I have no power of sifting the useful from the useless, the straw from the chaff. Nature never meant me for a detective, I fear.'

'You should not regret it. It is not a noble vocation.'

I look with darkening face across the quiet landscape.

‘You forget that life or death are in the balance for me. I am playing for high stakes.’

‘Is it quite death?’ she says softly. ‘You have always the consciousness of innocence to take away the sting from the suffering.’

‘A fallacy.’ I answer gloomily. ‘I believe that if I were really guilty I should feel more resigned; but, being innocent, to be robbed of name, home, honour, everything dear in life to a man—oh! it is hard.’

‘Yes, it is hard,’ she repeats softly. ‘Very hard.’

I look round, for something, a very slight vibration in her tone, attracts me. I am not mistaken: her eyes are dim with tears, and her pale cold face has a new and strange expression upon it. It is a revelation to me. I have an odd feeling at my heart-strings, and, if only I dared, I would like to raise that daintily-gloved little hand to my lips and hold it there. It is just a fit, a sensation perhaps as transitory as that glow of pity for me which is shining in her face. It passes, and there is silence between us—a silence matching almost the deep Sabbath hush of the silent country. Then, how soon I do not know, the church bells commence to ring.

‘I must go,’ she says. ‘You will not mind my leaving you here.’

‘May I wait for you?’ I ask with a sudden impulse.

She looks at me deprecatingly, but without displeasure.

‘Do, please, remember, if you wish to maintain your identity, that you are Mr. Martin, chemist and postmaster of Market Deignton. Do you wish all the servants at the Court and all the villagers here to see us together?’

‘Not exactly,’ I admit. ‘I must go home, then, I suppose.’

‘Yes.’

‘There is no service in the afternoon?’

She shakes her head.

‘I sometimes come through the woods, though,’ she says, laughing. ‘But you must not dream of waiting until then. Do you hear?’

‘Yes.’

I hold the gate open. Just as she is passing through I ask her a question:

‘By-the-by, do you know anything of Mr. Callender, who lives at the White House?’

She shakes her head. ‘Only that he is a very harmless old invalid of phenomenal age—a connection of Lady Deignton’s, I believe. I have been to see him once or twice, but he is very infirm.’

‘Thank you.’

She nods to me, and I raise my cap. From a little knoll behind I watch her cross the meadow and enter the smaller plantation. When she has gone the day seems darker—the sun has disappeared behind a cloud.

I have a small volume of Shelley in my pocket,

and sometimes reading, sometimes thinking, the day steals on, whilst I wander restlessly around. From a distant hill I see the tiny congregation leave the church and slowly disperse. A little troop of the Court servants cross the meadows towards the park, and behind I can see Miss Deighton side by side with a man—a young man in clerical dress. I watch him leaning eagerly towards her, and I smile. You cannot change the impassiveness of those cold, clear features, my reverend and respectable friend. You can bring no light into those still gray eyes, nor a single tinge of colour into the pale cheeks. She does not even turn her head as she answers you. You are not of her world.

She is gone once more. A clock from the stables strikes one, and it seems to me that the brooding stillness of the winter's day grows deeper. I climb a hill, from which I can see the grove of trees which embosom the White House and the long graceful front of the Court. By counting the windows I can even find the room wherein the 'event' happened; and, like a certain great man in days before mine, I am for a moment fired into hot indignation at the silence of inanimate things. That room whose four walls witnessed the hideous deed which in men's minds is written down to my account could tell another tale. Why can they not for one moment find tongues and speak, give me but the slightest clue to follow up, the slightest indication which could help me out of this mesh of broken threads and tangled suppositions? Day by day of my solitude

my heart is growing harder towards the unknown whose burden I am bearing. Whether it be man or woman, my heart is steeled against all thoughts of pity. Even if it should be she, she has had her chance. Her prayers should not move me now. The iron of suffering has entered into my soul. She has been the bane and the curse of my life. What was once passion has dried up into hate. Better keep clear of that narrow path which leads to my redemption, my Lady Deighton, with your soft eyes, whose bondage is madness, and your sweet temptings which once led me to the very edge of the precipice of dishonour! I have a fancy that I am wearing your chains—chains no longer of roses, but of iron; but the day may come when I can cast them off, and I shall have no mercy. The secret of that guilty chamber yonder whose window shines now so softly in those faint gleams of wintry sunlight has been well kept; but a single turn in the wheel of fortune, and it may be my turn. It were well for you then to say your farewell to the things of this earth, for neither your temptings, nor your passionate pleadings, nor your cries for mercy shall hold my hand.

An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Your life for my sufferings.

CHAPTER XIX.

A WOMAN'S PITY.

As afternoon steals on I descend from the hill and enter the wood once more. Through the still air I can hear distinctly the chimes of the stable-clock as it strikes three; and its echoes have scarcely died away before the gate at the further end of the wood opens and swings back. Soon I see her coming slowly towards me, carrying a mysterious-looking brown parcel in her hands.

'Here still?' she exclaims, with high-arched eyebrows.

'Here still,' I echo, standing before her, cap in hand.

'How fierce you look!'

'I am fierce. I am weary of my bondage,' I cry, with a little burst of bitterness. 'My solitude has made me a man of moods. I am not fit for your company this afternoon, Miss Deignton. I should be alone. I have no right to inflict myself upon anyone.'

'Nonsense!' she laughs lightly. 'Do you know, I believe that there is something far more prosaic the matter with you, and I don't wonder at it.'

I look at her inquiringly. Her face is full of a bright, half-humorous sympathy which I cannot help finding attractive.

'You want to know what is really the matter with you?'

'Certainly.'

'You are hungry.'

'Can you see it in my face?' I ask, smiling despite myself.

'I can see more than hunger—starvation,' she laughs. 'Confess, now, you have had no lunch?'

'Lunch! No.'

'Nothing to eat, in fact, since breakfast.'

'I admit it.'

With a little laugh, half-apologetic and altogether musical, she commences to untie the small brown-paper parcel which she has been carrying. For a moment I am mystified. Then the outer covering falls away, and I see two little piles of sandwiches.

'These are *pâté de foie gras*,' she says, touching them with her forefinger; 'the others are beef. I hope they'll be good; I cut them myself.'

I take a sandwich from each pile, and discover that I am voraciously hungry. I do not say much in the way of thanks; I eat the sandwiches. Directly I have finished she takes out her watch.

'I have not come here to stay with you,' she remarks. 'I don't lay claim to being in any way a properly-behaved young woman, but it won't quite do for me to be wandering about these woods with you, will it? At any moment some of the servants or villagers might come this way, and if Lady Deighton once got to know, farewell to my chance of being useful to you. There is a path just here which leads into the avenue. You can go as far as there with me, and then—good-bye.'

We walk on in single file, for the path is narrow and the undergrowth thick. About half-way we are compelled to pause for a moment while I hold back some brambles for her ; and before we proceed, I ask her a question.

‘Miss Deighton.’

‘Yes?’

‘I have a question to ask you.’

‘I am ready.’

‘Do you really believe that Lady Deighton killed your father?’

She looks carefully around. We are alone, and in a perfectly solitary place, but she lowers her voice almost to a whisper.

‘I do. I honestly believe it.’

‘And if you could do so, you would not hesitate to prove it?’

‘Why should I? Lady Deighton is nothing to me. My one desire is for justice. So long as it is my father’s murderer who suffers, I care not who it may be.’

Her face is wonderfully stern in the half-light. She is standing close up against an oak-tree, and her features stand out in bold and striking relief against the gnarled dark trunk. I look at her, and my heart glows. One person in this world, then, is in sympathy with me. There is one person who shares my great desire. No one save he only who has felt the bitterness of utter isolation in thought and sympathy and person from the whole world of his fellows can realize in any degree the sweetness of

such a thought. And of all people in the world it is she.

‘You would not spare her, then?’ I persist.

‘Not for a moment. Not though she begged me upon her knees. Not though my father himself rose up from the dead and implored me to. Your broken life is in the scale as well as my father’s death.’

We are in the smooth, broad avenue now, which bends in the distance and leads up to the Court. It is here that we must part.

‘You must not come again unless I write,’ she says. ‘If anything happens you will hear from me at once.’

A letter from her! At any rate, it is something to look forward to. She holds out her hand, and I clasp it in mine. A gleam of sunlight travelling up the long, open avenue rests upon her face, and touches it with a curiously softening beauty. For a moment we stand there in silence. I have something else to say, one last word, but before I can say it we are disturbed. There is the sound of wheels close behind, and, turning round, we are confronted by a most unaccustomed sight. A shabby four-wheeled fly is slowly jogging towards us, its heavy wheels rolling almost noiselessly along the smooth drive.

‘Do not go away,’ she says quietly. ‘Whoever can it be? And on a Sunday, too!’

The occupant of the fly sees us, and, putting her head out of the window, calls to the driver to stop. He does so, and a dark, foreign-looking girl, with black eyes and troubled face, leans out towards us.

‘We are going the right way to Deignton Court, if you please?’ she asks timidly.

‘Yes,’ I answer; ‘straight on.’

She fingers for a moment with the window strap, and looks at us nervously.

‘You live at Deignton Court, perhaps?’ she says, addressing my companion. ‘I have come a long way just to see my Lady Deignton, and perhaps even now she will not see me. It is the wrong day to come, is it not, on the Sunday? Is she what you call very devout, the Lady Deignton?’

‘Oh no; I don’t think so,’ Miss Deignton answers a little brusquely. ‘I have no doubt that she will see you if you have anything to say to her.’

‘Thank you so much!’ The head is withdrawn, and the fly rolls on. We look after it in silence.

‘I wonder what that means?’ Miss Deignton says thoughtfully.

‘One of Lady Deignton’s foreign relations, perhaps,’ I suggest. ‘She was half Hungarian, was she not?’

‘I don’t think that young lady has quite enough assurance for a relative of Lady Deignton’s,’ she answers a little dryly. ‘Good-bye; I am going to hurry up to the house.’

Our hands touch for a moment, and then she turns and walks swiftly up the avenue with light, springy footsteps. I watch her slim, upright figure, with the free, proud carriage, until it disappears, and away ahead I see the back of the fly as it creeps onwards. Once or twice on my homeward walk amongst the fast gathering shadows the memory of that girl’s

pale, dark face and plaintive voice crosses my mind. There is something a little odd about this visit of hers to Lady Deignton, and her timid anxiety lest, after all, she should not be able to see her. But by the time I have reached home and the shelter of my little room, the memory has faded from my mind ; other thoughts have usurped my whole attention. How am I to know that this dark girl, with her pale, anxious face and foreign accent, is another of the figures whom fate has woven into the tragedy of my life ?

CHAPTER XX.

AN EPISODE AND ITS NARRATION.

ON Monday morning, soon after ten o'clock, a trim little girl, who tells me that she is Miss Deignton's maid, brings me the following letter. I tear the envelope open, and seeing that it is of some length, I take it into my room and read it there :

‘DEIGNTON COURT,
‘*Monday morning.*

‘DEAR MR. MARTIN,

‘I promised to let you know all that happened here likely to bear in any way whatever upon the matter in which we are both so deeply interested. Something has happened which is certainly odd, and I hasten to acquaint you with it, although, of course,

it may not have any connection whatever with the end we have in view.

‘When I reached the Court last evening, after leaving you, the fly which had passed us in the avenue was drawn up at the front-door, and the girl who spoke to us was just getting into it. She seemed much distressed, and although she had her veil drawn, I could see that she was crying bitterly. So I stopped her.

‘“Have you seen Lady Deighton?” I asked.

‘She shook her head tearfully. “It is cruel of her!” she sobbed. “She will not see me even for a moment. I have sent and begged her to do so, but she takes no notice.”

‘“Does she know what your business is, or who you are?” I ask.

‘The child—she is little more, really—shook her head. “I sent up my name, and I told her that I hoped she would pardon my coming, but I was in great trouble. I wanted to ask her a question—just a simple question, that is all.”

‘“Does she know your name?” I asked.

‘The girl shook her head. “No; I am as much a stranger to her as she is to me. She might have let me speak to her.”

‘I considered for a moment. As you doubtless have decided, it seemed very odd. I came to the conclusion that the servant must have mis-delivered the message in some way. As a rule, I never interfere in any way with my stepmother, but in this case I decided to do so.

“Come back again, and I will see what I can do,” I told her.

‘She commenced to thank me, but I stopped her and took her into my sitting-room. Here I told her to wait, while I went in search of Lady Deighton.

‘I found her in her room with the door locked. When she heard my voice she came to speak to me, without, however, opening the door.

“Is that you, Katherine?” she asked.

“Yes,” I answered. “Can I come in? I want to speak to you.”

“Are you alone?” she asked.

“Yes,” I told her.

‘Then she opened the door and let me in, closing it again after me.

“I have a bad headache, and I am lying down,” she said, looking at me curiously. “Do you want me particularly?”

‘She looked ill, and she had evidently been lying down. Her hair was in disorder, and there were dark rims under her eyes.

“I am sorry I disturbed you,” I began; “but there is a girl downstairs——”

“I have already sent word that I will not be troubled with her,” she interrupted, frowning. “Why have they not sent her away?”

“She would have gone by now if I had not stopped her,” I explained. “I met her as I came in, and as she was in great distress, I came to ask you whether you could not see her just for a minute.

She has come a long way, poor girl, and she is so bitterly disappointed."

"It is no concern of mine," my stepmother answered coldly. "She has come on some begging errand or other, no doubt, and I decline to be troubled with her."

"She only wants to ask you a question."

"And that question probably is, how much I will give her," my stepmother interposes coldly. "I have had such callers before, and I have learned to be firm. This is no affair of yours at all, Katherine; but, since you have interfered, you can tell her that I will not see her, once for all. Please to leave me alone."

'I could see that it was no use to talk to her, for she had made up her mind; so I went downstairs and told the girl that I could do nothing for her. She looked so bitterly disappointed, and was, withal, so pale and worn out that I was really sorry for her.

"Stay and have a cup of tea with me before you go," I said. "It is a long drive to the station again."

'She sat down and burst out crying. I ordered the tea and left her alone for a time. She was soon more composed, and looked up at me gratefully.

"How kind you are!" she said. "I am so miserable!"

"You are young to be travelling alone," I said. "Have you come far?"

"I have come from Buda-Pesth on purpose to see Lady Deighton," she said pitifully.

"All alone?" I asked.

“All alone. There was no one to come with me. My father is dead, and my mother.”

“And have you no relatives at all, then?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No one, except a married sister, whom I shall never see again, and a brother whom I have lost.”

“Lost! Do you mean that he is dead?” I ask.

“No; lost. It was to make some inquiries about him that I came here. That was why I wanted to see Lady Deignton.”

“If that is all, she shall see you,” I declared. “But why Lady Deignton especially? Would not anyone else do?”

She looked at me and her face cleared. “Why, yes. Anyone who was here, let me see, nearly two years ago. How stupid I was! I never thought of asking anyone else but Lady Deignton in her own house, but I dare say some of the servants would know even better than she. Were you here the year before last?” she asked timidly.

“In what month?”

“In October—about the twenty-second.”

“You may imagine that I started. I had never for a moment thought of connecting her in any way with what you call the “event.” Even now, of course, the date might be a coincidence, but I could not help starting.

She noticed it, and asked me why I seemed surprised. I composed myself as well as I could.

“It was the date that startled me,” I answered. “Perhaps you do not know that a very terrible

thing happened here in this house on that very date?"

"No. What was it?" she asked, with wide-opened eyes.

"Sir Humphrey Deighton, the master of this house, was murdered."

"Murdered!" She repeated the word with a little thrill, and looked away into the fire. "No; I never heard of it. How should I? I was in Hungary. I do not even read the English newspapers. It was dreadful! Who did it?"

"I shook my head. "No one knows."

"What! has no one been punished for it?" she asks.

"No one."

"She smiled with a little superior air. "In France or Hungary that would not be. The police would discover it."

"Let us talk of that no longer," I said. "Why was it that you mentioned that date?"

"I will tell you," she said. "I have a brother. All his life he has been wild and strange; able to settle nowhere; as clever as any man could be, but without industry, without perseverance. He would not keep in any one place; he could only live travelling; he had been many things. When we last heard of him he had become valet to a gentleman, and was travelling in England."

"Did he write and tell you this?" I asked.

"He did; but he did not say the name of his master, nor did he give any address. He promised

to write again, but he never did. I have never heard anything of him since ; and now my mother is dead, and I am alone in the world—quite alone.”

“ “ And it is about him that you have come here to make inquiries ? ” I asked.

‘ She nodded. “ The only thing I had to go by was the postmark of his last letter, and the date—twenty-second of October.”

“ “ And its postmark ? ”

“ “ Market Deighton, England.”

‘ I sat still, thinking it over.

“ “ I made some inquiries at Market Deighton,” the girl went on sadly, “ and the only house where gentlemen with men-servants would be likely to come visiting would have been here. That is why I came here to see Lady Deighton. I want to ask her to tell me if any gentleman with a servant was staying here about the date that the letter was posted to me.”

“ “ It was not necessary to see Lady Deighton to find that out,” I said to her reassuringly. “ I can tell you in a moment.”

‘ She clasped her hands together joyously, and half rose from her seat.

“ “ But, really,” she cried, “ how good—how very good you are ! ”

‘ I rang the bell for the housekeeper, Mrs. Brown. She came in a minute or two, and gave us the information I asked for at once. Of the few people staying at Deighton Court on that memorable night, only Mr. Lugard had a man-servant with him. She

was sorry that she had no recollection of his appearance, and there was no one else in the house to whom she could apply for information. All the servants who had been in the house at the time had either left since of their own accord, or had been dismissed. She had an idea that he was a sickly young man, and not in very good health; but even that might be fancy on her part. She was very sorry that she could remember nothing further. At any rate, she was sure as to the main point—Mr. Lugard, and no one else, had a man-servant with him.

‘Mrs. Brown went out, and I turned to my little protégé.

“‘You see, if your brother was here at all,” I said, “he was in the service of Mr. Lugard.”

“‘And do you know this gentleman’s address—Mr. Lugard’s?” she asked eagerly.

‘I shook my head. It was piteous to see her face fall.

“‘It can very easily be found, though, I should think,” I told her. “Mr. Lugard came here from Vienna, and had been in some way connected with the Austrian service. If you write to the Austrian embassy in London, no doubt they will have his address, and will be able to forward the letter.”

“‘And how long will it be before I can get an answer?” she asked.

“‘Two or three days, I should think.”

‘She had finished her tea, and now she rose to go. She held out both her hands to me impulsively.

“What are you going to do until you hear?” I asked her.

“I shall stay at Market Deignton,” she answered. “If, after all, it was not my brother who was Mr. Lugard’s servant, I may have to make some more inquiries here.”

“And if you don’t succeed at all?” I asked her.

‘She turned very white. “I—I do not know,” she said. “I shall try and get some situation.”’

“You do not mind telling me,” I said as kindly as I could. “You have not much money, perhaps?”

‘She shook her head. “Only a few pounds. Perhaps it was rash of me to come; but in Buda-Pesth what should I have done? I had no relatives, no friends. I pined for my brother, and, wild though he has been, he is always generous. I knew that he would help me. I thought that he might help me to get a situation.”’

‘She looked very young and friendless, and I was sorry for her.

“Where are you going to stay at Market Deignton?” I asked.

“At the Deignton Arms,” she answered timidly. “But I do not know what will become of me, if I do not hear in two or three days,” she added with quivering lips.

‘It seems quite a wild-goose chase that the poor child has entered upon, but I did not like to tell her so. I gave her the address of a respectable woman in Market Deignton who was once my nurse, and wrote, asking her to take the child in for a few days,

and I promised to go and see whether she has had any news the day after to-morrow.

‘Then she went away, still crying, but very grateful.

‘I have made a great effort to put down our conversation just as it took place, and I think that I have been fairly successful; so, please take care of this letter. It is just possible that we may want to refer to it later on.

‘During the evening I saw my stepmother as I was passing her room. She looked better, and asked me to go in.

“‘It was a little hard on that girl, perhaps, not to have seen her this afternoon,” she remarked. “Did you give her anything before she went away?”

““She did not want money,” I said, changing my position so that I could keep my eyes fixed upon Lady Deignton’s face.

““Nonsense! they all want money,” she said impatiently. “If she didn’t, what did she want?”

““Information about a brother,” I answered. “He was valet to some gentleman about two years ago, and wrote her a letter from here. That is the only clue she has.”

““Well, I hope somebody was able to help her,” my stepmother remarked, quite kindly for her. “Tell me all about it.”

‘I told her everything. She made no remark until I had finished.

““It is singular!” she said then. “I don’t see what good I could have done if I had seen her. I scarcely remember Mr. Lugard; and certainly Mrs. Brown

is the only one in the house who could have told her whether he brought his servant here or not. I am glad that you made inquiries for her and gave her some tea. If I knew where she was, I would send her some money. It seems a very deserving case for a little charity, if her tale is true."

'I opened my lips to tell my stepmother that the child had not gone away, but was still at Market Deighton. Then I changed my mind. I determined to keep this to myself for the present. That is the close of the episode.

'No doubt you will wonder what has made me write all this to you so carefully. I think I wonder a little myself, but the poor child's story made an impression upon me, and anything about anyone in this house about the time of the "event" is interesting to me, and must be so to you. We cannot tell in what direction the light may come. I must say that my stepmother's obstinate refusal to see this girl puzzled me, but her indifference afterwards, when I had told her what I had done, seemed too natural to be anything but genuine. Still, keep this letter with your other notes.

'K. D.

'P.S.—This morning I found the girl's card just where the servant had put it down, in Lady Deighton's room. The name was "Olive Walsingham." Strange that she should have an English name !'

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MRS. MASON.

MISS DEIGNTON is right. I cannot, for the life of me, see any connection between this girl and any of the personages in the 'event.' At the same time, the fact that her brother should have sent her a letter from here dated only a day before the murder is a little curious, even if looked at only in the light of a coincidence. It is just another of those minor circumstances which seem in themselves to call for some explanation, but which present scant surface for investigation.

I am standing before my sitting-room fire, smoking, and thinking over the contents of my letter, when David unceremoniously thrust his head in at the door.

'Telegram, sir.'

As I have had no warning from the instrument, I know he means a telegram to be despatched. I put aside my pipe, and make my way into the shop.

Another coincidence! The young lady who is sitting in my one cane-backed chair writing out her message is the subject of the letter which I have just been reading. I recognise her instantly, but, to my relief, I find that the recognition is not mutual. Naturally, she does not expect to find the man whom she had seen walking with Miss Deignton in the avenue of Deignton Court behind the counter of a village shop. She regards me without interest, and altogether as a stranger.

‘How much is this telegram, please?’ she asks, holding it out towards me.

I read it over indifferently, counting each word :

‘*To* Mr. Hamilton Lugard, care of Austrian Embassy, Downing Street, London.

‘Can you tell his sister the address of Jean Margot, valet in your service when last heard of? Is he still with you? Reply to Olive Walsingham, Post-office, Market Deignton.’

‘Two-and-fivepence,’ I say briefly.

She counts out the money upon the counter and rises.

‘Will the reply be sent to me directly it comes, or shall I call for it?’ she asks.

‘You have not given me your address, so I should not know where to send it,’ I remind her. ‘You had better call here, I think.’

She gives a little sigh, and looks aimlessly around.

‘I wonder how long it will be before the reply will come,’ she remarks.

‘It depends upon how long the person delays it to whom it is addressed,’ I answer. ‘You might get an answer within an hour and a half.’

‘Thank you. I hope it will be soon,’ she says meekly. ‘Can you tell me, is there a library here?’

I shake my head.

‘No; I am afraid that Market Deignton could scarcely support a library. Mr. Smith, at the stationer’s shop across the market-place there, has a few books to sell, I believe.’

‘Thank you. I don’t want to buy any, but I will go and see,’ she says. ‘Good-morning, and many thanks.’

‘Good-morning.’

She walks out, and I watch her pick her way across the cobbled market-place to Mr. Smith’s. Everyone is looking at her. Strangers are rare in Market Deignton, and with her big, dark eyes and dainty, tight-laced little figure, she is curiously at variance with the rusticity which is the chief element of the little town. Even our country girls do not lift their skirts quite so high as Miss Olive Walsingham, as she carefully picks her way along with as much deliberation as though the cobbles were stepping-stones, and the puddles between them were parts of a swiftly-flowing river. But, then, the young women of Market Deignton do not wear French boots with high heels.

I despatch her message; and more than once during the morning I find myself wondering what the answer will be. It is a little before one when I hear the click of the instrument, and find that it has arrived.

‘*To* Miss Olive Walsingham, Post-office, Market Deignton.

‘Jean Margot left my service during October, year before last, through illness. Have not seen him since, but believe he left the country.

‘HAMILTON LUGARD.’

I write the message out slowly, and am just direct-

ing it, when I hear a light step upon the floor and a rustling of draperies. I glance up and find that Olive Walsingham is standing on the threshold of the shop, looking at me apologetically out of her dark, childish eyes. She advances to the counter with an inquiring smile and raised eyebrows.

‘There is no reply for me yet?’ she asks. ‘Ah! I suppose I am too soon. But it is so dull here. I will come again.’

I hold out the envelope to her.

‘I was just addressing this to you,’ I say. ‘It has this moment come.’

She takes it from my hand and opens it eagerly. Then her little mouth quivers and her eyes grow dim. It is a disappointment, and she looks more like a child than ever. I have a horrible fear that she is going to cry, and I yield to a sudden impulse which has come to me. I lean across the counter towards her.

‘I hope you won’t think me impertinent if I make a suggestion,’ I say. ‘I couldn’t help seeing your telegram, you know, and the reply.’

She looks up at me quite frankly. I can see that what I had feared is not far off. There is already a tear hanging upon her eyelashes.

‘Of course not,’ she assents.

‘Well, you are trying to find your brother, are you not, who was valet to Mr. Lugard, and who was staying at Deighton Court two years ago?’

‘Yes; that is what I am here for. He wrote me, and the letter was posted here in October. He did

not say a word about leaving, and since then I have not had a single line from him. And now—now——’

There is a little break in her voice, and she looks down at her black gown.

‘I understand,’ I interrupt hastily ; and I dare say there is enough of sincerity in my tone to inspire her with a little further confidence in me. ‘Well, what I was going to suggest is this : Why don’t you inquire at Deighton Court amongst the servants?’

‘I was there yesterday,’ she exclaims. ‘Miss Deighton was very, oh ! very kind to me ; but it seems that something very terrible happened in the house just about the time my brother was there, and nearly all the servants left. The housekeeper was the only one, but she could remember nothing. She only knew that after the terrible accident that happened there everyone left the house, of course. She remembered that Mr. Lugard had a servant there, and that was all.’

I do not say anything for a moment, for I am following out a train of thought of my own. My sitting-room door is open, and I can hear the clatter of plates as Mrs. Mason moves about preparing my luncheon.

‘I must find Lionel somehow,’ my companion continues tearfully. ‘Oh, how I wish I knew what to do !’

The clatter of plates in the room behind suddenly ceases, and I fancy that I hear a sharp feminine ejaculation. I do not take much notice of it.

Probably the cat has stolen something, or Mrs. Mason has broken a plate. But the sound itself and the movement remind me of my housekeeper, and I remember suddenly that she was in service at Deignton Court at the time of the 'event.' I turn to my companion.

'It is rather a coincidence,' I remark, 'but my housekeeper was housemaid at Deignton Court about that time, and was one of the servants who left soon after. Should you like to ask her any questions?'

She jumps up at once with an eager little cry.

'Oh! how good of you to think of it! Yes, yes!' she exclaims. 'Let me go in and ask her now—may I?'

'Certainly,' I answer. 'Will you come this way?'

I lift up the counter flap, and she passes behind. Then I throw wide open the door of the sitting-room, and we enter together. My luncheon is half laid, and the remainder of the things are all on the table, only waiting to be arranged.

'Mrs. Mason,' I call out, 'I want you a moment.'

There is no answer, nor is there any sound in the kitchen. I call again: 'Mrs. Mason, just a moment.'

Still she does not come. Then I go out into the kitchen. It is empty, and for the first time in my life I find it in confusion. The street-door stands wide open. I step back into the sitting-room perplexed.

'Mrs. Mason must have gone out for a moment to fetch something,' I say. 'It is very odd, but she will certainly be back directly. You can see that she

has not finished setting my lunch. Won't you sit down ?'

'Thank you.'

She sits down in my easy-chair without any embarrassment, but her restless black eyes go wandering all round the room. She is regarding my bookcases with amazement.

'What heaps and heaps of books you have !' she remarks naively. 'It is quite like a library.'

'Would you like to look at them ?' I remark absently, for I am puzzled concerning Mrs. Mason's disappearance.

She is evidently a young lady who dislikes sitting still, for she is up and reading the titles over to herself in a moment. Suddenly she gives a little cry of pleasure.

'Oh ! how delightful ! how charming ! You have Corneille, and Racine, and De Maupassant, and Sainte-Beuve, and Victor Hugo, and ever such a lot of French books ! Do you read them yourself ?' she asks, turning to me in naïve astonishment.

'Occasionally, when I can find time,' I answer, smiling.

She is taking them down and greedily turning over their pages one by one.

'Let me lend you one or two,' I suggest.

'Oh, how charming ! Thank you ever so much !' she exclaims, darting a quick look of gratitude towards me. 'I'll take Corneille, if I may, for one, and—and——'

She takes one or two volumes from the case and

glances rapidly through them. Then she suddenly seems to remember her errand and looks at me inquiringly.

‘Your housekeeper does not seem to come,’ she remarks.

I am a good deal perplexed. Lunch is not half set yet, and we have been in the room nearly ten minutes. I go out into the kitchen and look up and down the street and across the market-place. There is no one in sight. Then I close the outer door, and on my way back I see a white garment thrown carelessly into a corner. It is Mrs. Mason’s apron with the strings all torn, as though thrown off in a hurry. I go back into the sitting-room and make the best apology I can.

‘I am very sorry, but there are no signs of my housekeeper. Suppose you call in some time this afternoon. She will certainly be here then.’

My visitor, who is on her knees before the book-case, rises reluctantly, and gathers up the books she has selected.

‘It is so good of you!’ she says impulsively, ‘and I shall enjoy these books. Mr. Smith’s were detestable, and the place is terribly *triste*. Shall I come about four?’

‘That will do,’ I answer, opening the door for her. ‘Good-morning.’

‘Good-morning, Mr. Martin,’ she says, hugging her books with one hand, and holding out the other to me. Then she walks briskly away, and I watch her smiling to myself. If she is not a born French girl,

at any rate she has thoroughly imbibed the Southern spirit. A few minutes ago she was all tears and anxiety, now she is as gay and bright as though she had not a care in the world. It is a light-heartedness easily purchased.

I turn back to the sitting-room, and eat my lunch absently and without appetite. What am I to think of this new problem? In other words, what is the meaning of Mrs. Mason's sudden flight?

CHAPTER XXII.

‘SICK AM I, SICK OF A JEALOUS DREAD.’

AT a quarter-past two David returns from his dinner. I despatch him at once to Mrs. Mason's cottage with a message of inquiry as to the reason for her sudden absence. In an hour he is back again. The cottage is empty and shut up, he tells me. There is no sign of Mrs. Mason anywhere.

Punctually at four o'clock my visitor arrives. The consolation of her beloved Corneille has evidently been only transitory. She is looking troubled and anxious.

I lead her into the sitting-room without a word. She seems to expect it, and there are several people in the shop who look at her curiously as she enters. She is too disturbed, however, to be conscious of any particular scrutiny.

I am obliged to leave her alone for a few minutes. When I am able to quit my post in the shop, I find her seated in my easy-chair, and gazing disconsolately into the fire. This time the bookshelves seem to have lost their charm.

‘Is your housekeeper here?’ she asks directly I enter. ‘I cannot hear anyone out there.’

‘I am very sorry,’ I tell her, ‘but Mrs. Mason has not been near the place. I have sent my boy all the way to her cottage, and he found it shut up and empty. I cannot account for it in any way.’

She smiles up at me piteously.

‘I am very unfortunate,’ she says. ‘I had no idea that the search would be so hard a thing, or I think that I should have stayed in Paris.’

‘I thought you lived in Buda-Pesth?’ I remark.

‘No; my mother came from there, and just before she died we left Paris, where we had been living, and went back to Buda-Pesth to try and find an uncle of mine. But it was of no use; he had gone abroad. And soon after we had got to Buda-Pesth my mother was taken worse, and died, and there was I all alone. I went back to Paris and sold our few things there, and then I came to find Lionel. I never thought that it would be so difficult.’

‘Not even though he had not written you for so long,’ I remark.

She shakes her head sadly. ‘He never would write letters—never. And, besides, my mother was, oh! so angry with him for becoming a servant; although, poor fellow, he had tried hard to find something else

to do. But he was never happy unless he was travelling. He could not stay in one place.'

'I dare say that restlessness was the cause of his leaving Mr. Lugard,' I say, trying hard all the time to think of some consoling speech. But before I can frame it, David thrusts his head in at the door and hands me a note. I tear open the envelope, and after glancing it through, read it aloud:

'SIR,

'I regret that sudden illness forced me to leave your house this morning whilst preparing your lunch. I will come back as soon as possible, but it may be several days, perhaps weeks. I have sent to Mrs. Ransome asking her to call upon you, and I think that you would find her capable of supplying my place.

'I am sorry to have caused you any inconvenience, and remain,

'Your respectful servant,

'HANNAH MASON.'

'This appears to have been written from her cottage,' I remark; 'but my boy, whom I sent there after lunch, found it shut up. David!'

David appears promptly at the door. He does not even glance at me whilst I am speaking, but stares open-mouthed at my companion. Fortunately her distress is such that she is unconscious of him.

'Who brought this note, David?' I ask.

'A little boy, sir.'

'Whose little boy?'

'I did not notice, sir. I was serving Mrs. Holt when he came in, and he just put it on the counter and walked out.'

'Did you see him at all? Should you know him again if you saw him?' I ask sharply.

David shakes his head.

'I can't call him to mind any way, sir,' he admits. 'All I saw was that he was a little boy.'

I dismiss him with a quick movement of the head, and turn to my visitor.

'Very likely Mrs. Mason stayed somewhere in the town until she felt better, and sent the note before starting for her own home,' I say. 'There is only one thing more I can think of. I will walk over after the shop here is closed to-night and try and see her. I dare say she will be well enough to answer a few questions. I really don't see what else there is to be done.'

Her face, as changeable as an April sky, lights up again. For the moment she does not seem to have a care in the world.

'Oh, how good you are!' she exclaims suddenly, holding out both her hands to me in a little burst of gratitude. 'May I come too?'

I hesitate. This is a little more than I had bargained for, for I am no squire of dames, and should very much prefer my own company. Yet, how am I to tell her so?

'I am afraid that you would find it too far,' I say doubtfully. 'It is nearly two miles, and a very

muddy road. You would be tired to death before you got there.'

She raises her shoulders—an odd, foreign little gesture—and looks up at me with her face puckered up into what, at any rate, has the semblance of a frown.

'I do not mind the mud or the distance, if you will have me,' she says. 'It is very *triste* all alone.'

'Of course you may come, if you like,' I assent, a little ungraciously, however. 'You would be very much more comfortable at home with Corneille, though. Won't you take a few more books instead? It isn't exactly summer weather you know.'

'Thank you. I would rather go and see Mrs.—Mrs.—your housekeeper.'

'You'll spoil your shoes and your petticoats.'

'I do not mind about my shoes, and I can hold my skirts high,' she says, making a comical little grimace at me. 'Petticoats! what droll words you English use!'

'Well, if you are determined to come, of course I shall be very pleased,' I say, with a sigh which I am a little ashamed of, and which I make some effort to stifle. 'Do you know where the church is?'

She nods. 'I am staying just opposite, at Mrs. Copeland's.'

'Well, be there at about a quarter-past eight,' I tell her. 'I cannot get away before.'

She jumps up as though suddenly aware it is time she brought her visit to an end.

'I shall be there!' she exclaims cheerfully 'And

now I will leave you in peace for a short time. *Au revoir.*’

‘By-the-by, shall you be seeing Miss Deighton again?’ I ask her.

At the mention of Miss Deighton’s name her face lights up.

‘Ah, she is so good and kind, that beautiful Miss Deighton!’ she exclaims impulsively. ‘She has promised to come and see me; it may be this afternoon. It is for that reason that I am hurrying back.’

It occurs to me that I have not seen the hurry, but I make no comment.

‘Well, if you do see her, I think it would be a good idea if you got her to find out the names of some of the other servants who were at the Court when your brother was there. The housekeeper will know the addresses of some of them, at any rate. It would be better if you could find out some of the men-servants.’

She claps her hands. Evidently the suggestion pleases her. Something which comes into her face just at that moment touches me, and I am a little ashamed of my impatience. She is so much more of a child than a woman. How old she really is I do not know, but she looks scarcely more than sixteen. At any rate, she is pitifully young to be so friendless, and engaged on such a hopeless quest.

‘Till this evening,’ she exclaims, as she trips lightly across the floor of my little shop, and through the door which I hasten to open for her.

‘Until this evening,’ I answer, with more kindness

than my tone has yet known. 'If you change your mind about going, you need not trouble to send me word. I shall see whether you are there, and I shall not wait. Remember, it will be a very tiring walk, and it is not exactly summer weather.'

She only laughs at me, and I know quite well that she means to be there. Then she flits away, and I go back into my shop.

My tedious little routine of work seems more wearisome than ever this afternoon. Crazy Jack comes in as usual for his batch of letters, and I sort them and hand them over in grim silence. After then Mrs. Ransome arrives to offer herself in Mrs. Mason's place. She is a large, cumbersome woman—a type I dislike to have about me—and with a remarkable aptitude for back-door gossip. I am forced to engage her, however, and I do so as briefly as possible. She has brought her apron with her, and goes into the kitchen at once to prepare tea ; and I linger behind the counter watching the dim gray twilight steal down upon the little town, and the hills in the distance grow dark and blurred. The monotony of this life of mine is beginning to eat into my heart. I am growing very weary, and the goal seems yet as far away as ever.

And then, in the midst of my very gloomy reflections, my eyes light upon a figure crossing the market-place, and remain for a moment fixed there. My discontent is instantly forgotten. Life has suddenly taken unto itself more roseate colours. I lose myself in an allegory. The twilight which hangs over the

market-place and the more distant hills is the gloom lowering over my life, and the figure which comes to me from out of it is a figure of light, the visible antithesis of all darkness, the clear illumination of truth, which one day is to shine through all the clouds which are hanging over me. The thought takes hold of me, and I yield myself up to it. It is but a brief luxury, perhaps the luxury of madness. Only the sound of the shop-bell brings my feet down to earth once more.

She is in the shop, standing almost before me, and my eyes, quick to take notice of such things, show me that she is carrying her head a little more erect than usual, and that her eyes, when they meet mine, are devoid of the kindly recognition which I am becoming accustomed to look for. The old depression sweeps in once more upon me. What if she, too, were beginning to lose faith in me? Anything but that! I find myself inwardly murmuring. My back is already heaped with burdens. Another such as that, and I can fight no longer.

‘Good-afternoon, Miss Deighton,’ I say quietly.

‘Good-afternoon,’ she replies with perfect impassiveness. ‘I want some stamps—seven, if you please.’

David takes them from the drawer, and laying down a little pile of letters upon the counter, she commences to affix the stamps. I am at my wits’ end for a moment or two how to get rid of my assistant, but fortunately my eyes fall upon a bottle of medicine which I have been mixing. I hastily wrap it up, and hand it to David.

‘Put on your cap, and take this to Mrs. Rust, David,’ I direct; ‘I promised it an hour ago.’

‘Won’t it do when I go to tea, sir?’ he asks innocently.

‘No; take it now,’ I answer sharply. ‘You can go for your tea when you have left it; but be sure and get back by six.’

David is off without further hesitation, and I watch him depart with a sigh of relief. At last we are alone.

Miss Deignton calmly continues affixing the stamps to her letters, and I lean back against my shelves watching her. She is wearing a short tailor-made gown of rough brown tweed, a jaunty little hat, and thick boots and gaiters plentifully bespattered with mud. She does not even glance towards me, so I am compelled to break the silence.

‘Have you walked over?’ I inquire.

She nods assent. ‘Yes; I came over to call upon my little protégé.’

‘She has been here,’ I remark.

‘So I understand.’

Something is wrong. What is it? I cannot imagine, so I affect not to notice it. I tell her all that has passed between us, and of Mrs. Mason’s strange disappearance. She listens, with her eyes turned away, and idly tapping her boots with her walking-stick. When I have finished she frowns.

‘I have been a little sorry ever since that I troubled you with that long eltter,’ she remarks. ‘The affair is a little mysterious but I am quite convinced that

it does not concern us in any way. I do not think that it has any reference to the “event.”’

‘I differ from you. At any rate, I cannot feel so sure,’ I say.

She shrugs her shoulders. ‘We shall soon know. I have written to one of the other servants who was at the Court at the time.’

‘What are you going to do with the girl in the meantime?’ I ask.

She lifts her gray eyes to mine, and looks at me in a manner which I do not quite comprehend. It means displeasure, at any rate, and it chills me.

‘Oh, I shall keep her until something turns up about her brother; and, if nothing ever does, I shall try to find her a situation, if she is willing to take it. I leave her entertainment in your hands.’

‘Her entertainment! What do you mean?’ I ask bewildered.

‘Oh, nothing.’

‘Nonsense! You must mean something. I do not understand.’

She looks at me haughtily, her eyes full of a languid wonder, her head thrown back, and her tone icily cold. She is every inch a great lady.

‘You are not speaking to your shop-boy, Mr. Martin.’

I bite my lip and apologize. She is standing up with her back to me, and hears my words without remark. When I have finished she turns round.

‘Oh, it is of no consequence,’ she remarks. ‘What I meant, if you are really anxious to know, was that,

with the resources of your library, and your company after shop hours, she will probably be able to survive the dulness. Good-evening, Mr. Martin; I think I hear my cart coming.'

She has gone as far as the door before I can recover myself sufficiently to answer her. The fact is, I am very near being desperately angry.

'Miss Deignton !'

My voice has a ring of something in it which seems to compel her notice. She pauses on the threshold and looks round.

'I am at a loss to understand your insinuations,' I say as calmly as I can. 'Will you be so good as to explain yourself?'

'I do not think that it is necessary—or worth while.'

My anger has reached white-heat. It is all I can do to control my voice.

'As you wish,' I answer curtly. 'Good-evening.'

She is stepping from the shop when a smart dog-cart drives up, and a man in shooting-coat and gaiters jumps down and meets her on the threshold.

'Miss Deignton, by all that is fortunate!' he says, throwing away his cigar and lifting his cap. 'I suppose I ought to say by all that is unfortunate, for the mater and girls have gone to call upon you this afternoon, and it seems that I am the favoured one, after all.'

'I'm very sorry not to be at home, Captain Vavasour,' she says, stepping back into the shop with

him. ‘What an age it is since I saw you! I thought that you were in Egypt.’

‘Home two months ago—invalided,’ he laughs.

She looks him up and down, a brawny, sun-burnt man with long, fair moustache and well-cut features.

‘I suppose I may congratulate you upon your convalescence, at any rate?’ she says, smiling.

‘I think you may go so far as that,’ he answers, showing a set of very white teeth. ‘At any rate, I am not amongst the incurables.’

‘I should imagine not,’ she rejoins.

‘Do you know that the mater has gone on a formal visit of remonstrance to you?’ he continues, leaving the subject of his health. ‘I really think—we all think—that it is too bad of you to shut yourself up so. It must be ghastly dull at Deignton Court for you.’

‘No duller for me than for my stepmother,’ she remarks. ‘Do you think that we women have no resource save society?’

‘Oh, but it is different with Lady Deignton,’ he answers. ‘She is scarcely one of us; we hardly know her, in fact; whereas we may almost call you an old friend, may we not?’

I move away out of hearing, and busy myself with some drugs. I am not naturally a hot-tempered man, but as snatch after snatch of their gay conversation reaches me every now and then, I feel a passionate desire to hurl the bottle I am handling at the Honourable Captain Vavasour’s head. I know him

well enough by name, although, fortunately, we have never met. His father's place is the next to Deighton Court, and once, in the days when it was nothing to me, I had heard his name and Miss Deighton's coupled significantly together. It comes back to me now readily enough as I stand there with my back turned to them, and yet acutely conscious of their presence. I am angry with him, and I am, I think, more angry with her. Does she not consider what it must be to me to stand behind this wretched little counter, and have their conversation forced in upon my ears—conversation, by-the-by, which seems to have become more serious now, judging by her bent head and his lowered voice. 'All women are selfish—bitterly, miserably selfish!' I mutter savagely to myself as I stoop down amongst my bottles. I had thought her a little different. I had thought that the woman who had stretched out her hand to help a man in such sore straits as I was not like other women. Now I know that I was mistaken. I was a fool!

At last, after what seems to me an interminable while, a dogcart from the Court drives up. Miss Deighton shakes hands with Captain Vavasour, and hesitates. I can see that she is undecided whether or no she will speak to me again. She half looks round, and I return her glance. What she sees in my face evidently does not encourage her to speak, for she leaves the shop without a word.

I watch him lift her in, whilst the groom stands at the horse's head. She takes the reins, nods to him brightly, and drives off with a rattle.

Captain Vavasour comes in humming an opera tune, and sends a couple of telegrams, one to Tattersall's, and one to his tailor. Then he addresses a few remarks to me, which I answer with a curtness equal to his condescension, stares at me for a moment as though I were some untamed animal, and finally, lighting a fresh cigar, drives off. To this day he does not know how my fingers itched to throw at his shapely head the little bottle of quinine which I was handling. It was a near thing.

I take my tea in gloomy solitude, and afterwards finish up the letter-sorting and post-office work. I have forgotten to order any dinner, and Mrs. Ransome's ideas of an evening meal have not led her to make any preparation. So I fill my largest pipe, and make some coffee, and smoke my hardest until eight o'clock. As soon as I hear the church clock strike I take my cap and stick and start.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NIGHT PURSUIT.

TO-DAY everything has gone awry with me, and I am just in that mood when a hard, solitary walk along a muddy road, with a wet wind blowing across the open country into one's teeth, is useful as a sedative. But as I turn the churchyard corner I see that fate, still unkind, has denied me this last consolation. Miss

Olive Walsingham is waiting for me, in a smart little ulster and cap, with her hands stuck deep down into her pockets.

‘I was here ten minutes before my time,’ she calls out to me cheerfully as I raise my cap. ‘Am I not an example to my sex?’

‘You are,’ I answer dryly. ‘I hope you know that you have a rough walk before you?’

We are under a gas-lamp, and she holds out a little foot cased in a hideous pair of thick woman’s boots.

‘*Voilà!* My landlady’s. For the damp roads they are adorable. I can walk through banks of mud and rivers of water. But the appearance! Well, never mind; there is no one to see me except you, and I do not believe that you notice such things at all, do you?’

‘Not much,’ I answer gruffly. ‘Pardon me, may I smoke?’

‘Of course. I can’t imagine what you want to for, but you’re welcome, so far as I am concerned. But then you are odd, aren’t you?’

‘Am I? May I ask if that is your personal estimate of my character, or are you relying upon information received?’ I inquire with studied politeness.

‘Oh, information received, of course!’ she laughs. ‘I know all about you—ever so much.’

‘Indeed! And your informant?’

‘Oh, my landlady and her little daughter who waits upon me. You see, they will talk, and as for me, what have I to do but to listen? Besides, it is so

interesting. Listen. You are reserved and very unsociable; you especially avoid women; you read hard books; you smoke a great deal; and you are a—crank. That last word I did not know the meaning of before.'

'Go on! Surely that is not all?' I remark.

'Oh no! There is also a rumour that you have, as Mrs. Holt says, known better days, which means, I find, that you are a gentleman who has been obliged to become a shopkeeper. But, as I say, it is only a rumour.'

I look down at her suspiciously. Yes; there is a humorous gleam in her dark eyes.

'I trust that so wild a report did not obtain your credence,' I say.

'Oh, I don't know,' she replies airily. 'I am naturally of a romantic disposition, and have a great desire always to believe those sort of things; it is so much more interesting. I also hear that you never go to church, but that you give away a good deal more money than you can afford.'

'And who told you that?' I ask sharply. 'Not Mrs. Holt?'

'Oh, a little bird. *N'importe!* It is all chatter, of course.'

'Have you come to the end of it?' I inquire.

'To the end of my landlady's chatter. But then there is Miss Deighton's report, you know, and hers would not be chatter, would it?'

'Why not?'

'Oh, I do not know. But Miss Deighton seems too

proud and self-contained to talk gossip. What she told me was not so interesting, but I dare say it was nearer the truth.'

'And what did she tell you?' I ask with studious unconcern.

'Let me see. Oh, I remember. "By-the-by," she said, "Mr. Martin is a very superior person, and if you can interest him in your case, he will doubtless be able to advise and help you, better even than I can." Fancy her calling you a very superior person! Then she saw your Corneille, and so I told her all about you.'

'You did, did you?' I remark with sudden enlightenment. 'What did you say? I am quite interested.'

'Oh, I spoke well of you, I can tell you. I told her all about your funny little sitting-room, and all its books, and how kind you had been to me; and—oh, yes—I told her that I was going for a walk with her "superior person" after his little post-office was shut up. It was great fun.'

'Indeed!' I mutter between my teeth.

She glances up at me quickly, but it is too dark for her to see my face, which is perhaps just as well.

'Yes. It didn't matter, did it?'

'Oh, not in the slightest,' I assure her. 'Most discreet of you. By-the-by, you didn't happen to mention that our walk had a purpose, did you?'

'No. She seemed tired of talking about you then, and commenced to tell me that she had written to another of the servants who was at Deignton Court

two years ago. Miss Deighton has been very, very kind to me,' she went on, suddenly serious; 'but I don't think that I liked her quite so much to-day. She is very proud, is she not?'

'She is considered so, I believe. Am I walking too fast for you?'

'Walking! Do you really call it walking? Why, I have been running for the last half-mile. I don't mind it a bit, you know, but it makes me feel very tiny.'

I slacken down at once, and for awhile we walk on in silence. My own feelings are a little mixed. In one way, what I have just been told has made me very angry, and yet, at the same time, it has brought with it a certain relief. At any rate, I can understand Miss Deighton's altered manner to me now, and I wonder at it no longer. Of course she must feel a certain contempt for any man in my position who could find the opportunity and inclination to amuse himself with a child like this. What evil spirit, I ask myself fretfully, could have induced her to play so mischievous a part?

We have left the little town far behind now, in the hollow of the hills, and even the little cluster of twinkling lights has faded out of sight. The hedges, which have been high on either side all the way, have come to a sudden end, and we are crossing a stretch of bare common land interspersed with marshes and a few stunted gorse bushes. By the side of the road a heavily swollen stream is sobbing along, and from the distant hills comes the faint tinkling of a sheep-bell.

At the extreme end of this open space, known as King's Common, is Mrs. Mason's cottage, and about a mile further on is the village of Little Deignton and the entrance to the park. It is the most desolate part of the road, and as we are crossing it I feel my companion's hand upon my sleeve.

'Is it much further?' she asks timidly. 'If so, do talk to me. It is dreary, and it makes me afraid.'

'About three-quarters of a mile,' I say. 'Listen!'

I stop suddenly in the road and clutch her by the arm. For a full minute we stand there together, listening. At first I am inclined to think that I have made a mistake. There is nothing to be heard but that monotonous, gurgling flow of water, and the hoarse music of the sheep-bells upon the hillside. But, just as I am preparing to move on, I hear it again. It is the sound of wheels in front, gradually growing fainter and fainter in the distance. I hasten forward, quite forgetting my companion.

'What is it?' she asks in a hushed voice, struggling to keep by my side.

'Wheels,' I answer laconically. 'Come along as fast as you can.'

She catches hold of my coat-sleeve, and we do not speak again until we reach the little gray stone cottage where Mrs. Mason lives. As I had commenced to suspect, the gate is locked, and there is no light in any of the windows. I jump over the wall and knock loudly. There is no answer; I do not expect any. The windows are barred and the doors are bolted.

Mrs. Mason's illness has evidently not prevented her from taking a journey.

As soon as I have satisfied myself that the cottage is really empty, I step back into the road, and, kneeling down at the edge of the path, strike a match.

My companion, who has been leaning against the fence out of breath, comes over to my side, with her black eyes dilated with wonder.

'What are you going to do?' she whispers. 'What is it? Have you lost anything?'

I point downward into the little section of muddy road which is dimly lit by my flickering wax vesta. She looks there blankly.

'I can see nothing,' she exclaims. 'What is it?'

'Cart-wheels,' I answer laconically. 'Mrs. Mason left here five minutes ago. We are just too late.'

She looks up from the road into my face. 'What shall we do?' she asks.

'Find her,' I answer shortly. 'Do you see, the cart has gone towards Little Deighton. There is no railway-station that way, and the road ends in the village. She cannot be far away. Can you come a little further with me? After all, we may be on the right track.'

The excitement of the thing has laid hold of her. She is pale, but she has recovered her breath, and her dark eyes are gleaming.

'I can walk all night,' she answers, with a dash of fierceness in her tone. 'Let us lose no time. Come!'

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WHITE HOUSE.

SILENTLY we hurry along, my companion keeping pace with me bravely, and never once flagging behind. In about twenty minutes we are in the dark winding lane which leads down into the village, and scarcely a hundred yards along it is the only turn on the way.

It is nothing but a grass-grown cart-track, leading round to the back of the Court, and seldom used, except in timber-felling times; but after passing it once, I turn back and light a match. The wind blows it out immediately. I light another—fortunately, I have plenty—and stooping down, I examine the ground carefully. I am unexpectedly rewarded for my caution, and after a very brief inspection, I spring up and open the gate.

‘This way?’ she asks in surprise.

‘This way,’ I answer. ‘A cart has passed through here to-night, and within half an hour.’

‘Where does it lead to?’

‘I am not quite sure, but I think to Deignton Court,’ I answer. ‘Come along.’

It is hard going, but she keeps up by my side bravely. We skirt a ploughed field and then pass up a fine broad avenue of elms. I remember now being told that hundreds of years ago this was the principal entrance to the Court. When we emerge from the avenue, we are confronted with an obstacle.

The stream is flowing right across the road, and there is no hand-bridge. Olive gives a little cry.

‘Is there no way of getting over?’ she asks, looking round.

‘Only one,’ I answer. ‘Come!’

Long before she can realize what is going to happen, she is up in my arms, and I am knee-deep in the stream. For a moment she makes no resistance, although I can feel her breath falling hot upon my cheeks. Then, without any warning, she makes a violent attempt to jerk herself out of my arms, and almost upsets us both. I hold her tightly, however, until we reach the opposite side, and then I set her down.

‘How dare you?’ she asks passionately, wrenching herself away and stamping her foot. ‘How dare you?’

I look at her wonderingly. Her face is scarlet, and her black eyes are flashing.

‘How did you expect to get across?’ I ask calmly. ‘You couldn’t have waded. Would you have had me turn back or leave you here alone?’

‘You had no right. It was shameful! You treat me as though I were a child,’ she sobs out hysterically. ‘And I am not. I am a woman.’

‘Be one, then,’ I answer, a little gruffly, I fear, for I am in no humour for this sort of thing just now. ‘Remember what business we are on, and I’ll make my apologies to you later on. We have no time to waste now.’

She says not a word, but keeps by my side, and

we pass on under the deep shadow of the great trees. In a few minutes we come to a gate, and again there is a parting of the road. The main way goes through the gate round a grass field, and evidently terminates amongst the outbuildings at the back of Deignton Court. The other track, apparently very little used, enters a grove of thickly-growing black pine-trees, and leads I know not where.

I light another match, and stoop down. In my own mind I have no doubt but that we are bound for Deignton Court, but after a brief examination of the broken ground I am perplexed. The wheel-marks whose traces I have been following seem to lead right into the plantation. I begin to wonder whether, after all, we may not be upon a fool's errand. Perhaps a few hundred yards up the plantation we shall come upon a timber-waggon, deserted and left there till morning ; or, after all, the ruts may not be so recent as they seem. But, then, how about the cart-wheels which I most certainly heard start from Mrs. Mason's cottage ? At any rate I will follow this thing through to the end now I have come so far.

'We are going straight on, not through the gate,' I whisper to my companion. 'Follow me.'

We turn aside and plunge into the pine-grove. The darkness here is profound, and a strange, deep silence reigns all around us. Now and then there is the rustle of a pine-cone in the tree-tops, and once a rabbit comes scurrying across our path and vanishes in the undergrowth. Even our footsteps fall noise-

less on the soft carpet of fir-needles, and the thickly-growing trees seem to keep out all the night sounds of the open country. I can hear my companion's soft breathing growing quicker and quicker, and I know that she is nervous. In an impulse of pity I hold out my hand to her. She grasps it eagerly, and retains it. Her little fit of passion is over.

'I am frightened,' she whispers. 'I cannot see my way.'

'Keep quiet,' I answer in a low tone. 'It is almost over; we are coming to an opening.'

What seems to be an opening is only a narrow clearing, in the middle of which is a rude little hut, built tent-shape, of tree branches. But before we have taken half a dozen steps forward we are brought to an abrupt halt. A high, five-barred gate, wired at the bottom to keep out the rabbits, and covered with nails at the top, bars our way. Beyond it there seems to be a larger opening, or else we are at the extremity of the plantation. My eyes have grown so accustomed to the gloom that I cannot see which it is.

I feel for the fastening of the gate. As I expected, it is locked, and also secured by a padlock. Then I move my hands along, and peer through the darkness to find out what is by the side, hedge or wall. I find that there is a wall, higher even than the gate, and built of huge, rough, granite stones.

I turn back to my companion, who is standing patiently by my side.

'You must wait here while I go on a little way,' I

whisper. 'You will not be afraid? I shall not go out of hearing.'

'I will try not,' she answers, without much confidence in her voice, however. 'You will not be very long, please; I shall be so lonely, and it is very dark.'

'No longer than I can help.'

I put my foot on the lower rail of the gate, and cautiously clutch at the top of the wall with my hands; but before I can make another movement the light of a bull's-eye lantern is flashed upon me, and a man's tall, broad figure seems to spring out of the ditch. The sudden light blinds my eyes, and I can see nothing of the man save the long, shining barrel of his gun, which almost touches my chest.

'Stay where you are!' he orders in a deep, gruff voice. 'If you move a step backwards or forwards, I fire!'

I become instantly rigid, taking particular care to make no movement whatever in any direction. My challenger takes a steady survey of me, and then, lowering his gun, comes up to the gate. I can see that he is prepared to lay hands upon me should I attempt to escape, which I have not the faintest intention of doing. I am quite satisfied to let events develop. Meanwhile, to my surprise, Olive shows herself possessed of a courage and presence of mind for which I have certainly never given her credit. She does not utter a sound or make any movement. So far, I am satisfied: she is unobserved.

‘Now, what are you doing here?’ the man demands. ‘Out with it! Where are your mates?’

‘I have none,’ I answer coolly.

He grunts incredulously, and flashes his lantern over the wall. Its broad light flashes at once upon Olive’s pale, scared face. She is leaning up against a tree, and is evidently horribly frightened.

‘A girl!’ he mutters, astonished. ‘What business have you here at this time of night?’

‘We have lost our way following a cart which came in this direction,’ I explain.

‘A cart! There’s been no cart along here—no sign of one. You’ll have to find a better tale than that. This is a private road.’

‘To where?’ I ask.

He hesitates. ‘Never mind to where. It ain’t your business. What I want is to hear your account of yourself, and to take your name and address. You don’t seem to have any poaching kit about you, but you’ve got to give a better account of yourself before I’ve done with you.’

‘Oh, you’re a gamekeeper, are you?’ I remark.

‘What did you take me for—a policeman?’ he answers contemptuously. ‘Name and address, and the young woman’s! Out with them!’

He is standing well outside the plantation, and has lowered his lantern. My eyes, too, have become a little accustomed to the dim light. I look him steadily in the face. A sudden thrill of excitement is stealing through me. I know where I am; I know who this man is.

'You know my name as well as I know yours, John Rudd,' I answer firmly. 'Let me pass. I am Norman Scott, and I am going on to the White House.'

He falls back for a moment as though he were shot, and the lantern goes crashing from his fingers and rolls into the ditch. In the half-light I can scarcely see his features, but I can see the gleam in his eyes, and I can hear his laboured breathing as he stands before me blocking my path.

'Do you hear, John Rudd?' I repeat sternly. 'Stand aside, and let me pass! I am no poacher or housebreaker. Unlock this gate!'

His hand suddenly tightens upon my arm till I am forced to cry out with the pain.

'Back you go! back! back!' he cries hoarsely. 'Muster Norman or his ghost, you shall not pass this gate while I'm a live man!'

'Off with your hands!' I say, 'off with them!'

'A step further, and you're a corpse! Sure as there's a God above, I mean it!'

The muzzle of his gun is within a foot of my heart. I watch it fascinated. It does not quiver; it is as steady as a rod of steel. The man has dropped on one knee, and has taken careful aim. One step onward would be certain death for me.

'You're a brave man, John Rudd,' I say quietly. 'It is your turn to-night, but mine will come.'

I turn away, and Olive, with a little gasp of relief, clutches my hand. Side by side, and in absolute silence, we retrace our steps through the pine-grove,

and behind us, all the way, his footsteps sounding like a grim, ghostly echo of our own, stalks John Rudd, with his lantern in his hand and his gun under his arm.

At the dividing of the ways he leaves us, and this time Olive makes no protest when I take her carefully up and carry her over the stream. From the opposite side I turn and look back. John Rudd is standing still in the middle of the way as motionless as a dark, carved figure, watching us.

‘Good-night, John Rudd,’ I cry back to him, waving my hand; ‘you are a faithful night-watchman. We shall see what the daylight can do.’

He does not move or answer me in any way, but the rim of the moon is just rising from behind a bank of dark clouds and throws a faint, lurid light upon his set, gloomy face. Just as I am turning my back he slowly raises his gun and levels it at me. Olive gives a little scream and hurries me away. To tell the truth, I feel a great deal more comfortable myself when we are round the corner. My last hasty glimpse behind tells me that he is still there, but he has lowered his gun.

When we reach the road we look at one another almost for the first time. Olive gives a great sigh of relief, and clutches hold of my arm, which she does not abandon for the rest of the way home.

‘What an awful man!’ she exclaims. ‘What did he mean? Why was he so serious? what does it all mean? Oh, my head is whirling!’

‘The man was head-gamekeeper at the Court,’ I

say. 'I knew him many years ago ; he used to be in service with a relative of mine.'

'What do you suppose became of that woman?' she asks. 'Do you think that she really went that way?'

I shake my head.

'I cannot tell,' I answer. 'The man was very mysterious, but he was always harsh and reserved. If the cart went through there, it went to what is called the White House.'

'Who lives there?' she asks.

'I am not quite sure,' I answer deliberately. 'I mean to make some more inquiries to-morrow. By-the-by, your brother entered Mr. Lugard's service under an assumed name, did he not? Did Mr. Lugard know his real one?'

She looks up at me, surprised at my abrupt question.

'I am not quite sure,' she answers thoughtfully. 'I should think not ; he was not very proud of being a servant, as you can imagine, and I dare say he would keep his real name a secret. In the letter which I had from him he told me, if I was writing, to address the letter to some initials.'

'His real name was Lionel Walsingham, was it not?'

'Yes ; Lionel Margot Walsingham.'

'And what were the initials he told you to use when you wrote to him?'

She looks up at me curiously.

'I am sorry, but I cannot remember. I was trying to the other day. Why do you ask?'

‘I scarcely know,’ I answer; ‘it just occurred to me, that is all.’

‘In connection with anything that has happened to-night?’

‘No; I meant to ask you before. It seems to me important to know the name by which he went, if we want to find him.’

‘I’m so sorry I’ve forgotten the initials,’ she says; ‘I only know that there was a C in them.’

‘And the letter—I suppose you have not kept that?’ I ask.

‘No; mother had it when it came, and I think that she destroyed it. I kept only the envelope.’

I can see that she is almost ready to drop with fatigue, so I ask her no more questions. She alludes to the subject once more, however, just as we are nearing home.

‘I think, after all, Mr. Lugard knew his real name,’ she remarks, ‘because the man who recommended Lionel to go to him was a friend of Mr. Lugard’s, and he knew Lionel well, too. Lionel was proud of our name, and I don’t think that he would use it while he was a valet.’

‘I think, perhaps, we had better find out some time from Mr. Lugard what name he went under,’ I say; ‘we must talk it over to-morrow, when you are less tired.’

She looks up at me curiously. ‘I wonder why you are so interested in helping me,’ she says suddenly. ‘It is very, very kind of you. May I ask you a question?’

I nod. 'If you want to.'

'What did that man mean when he called you by another name?'

I look at her searchingly. Her dark eyes are fixed steadily upon mine. Has she begun to suspect, I wonder, that my interest in her lost brother is not all for her own sake?

'It meant that I, too, have been one of the unfortunate people of the world, Miss Walsingham,' I say quietly. 'Some day I may tell you all about it.'

Her eyes are full of sympathy, and she holds out both her hands with a sudden impulsive gesture. We are standing on the pavement now, in front of the cottage where she is lodging.

'I am so sorry,' she says simply. 'Good-night.'

'Good-night,' I answer; 'we mustn't stay talking here, or we shall wake all the good people in the place.'

I watch her disappear into the cottage, waving me a final farewell, and then I go striding down the narrow street and across the market-place home.

Eleven o'clock strikes as I unlock my door and sink into my easy-chair, drawing my pipe and tobacco towards me. It has been a long evening, but I am not conscious of any fatigue; on the contrary, a strange exhilaration possesses me. I make myself some coffee, and I sit into the small hours watching the smoke from my pipe curl upwards to the ceiling and weaving a whole phantasmagoria of dreams and fancies. The dull, leaden despair of yesterday and the days before has gone. The first gleam of light

is parting the clouds which have hung over my head so long. My hand is nerving itself to strike, and before me I can see my weapon. What matters though it be down an avenue of danger and difficulty ? I am a man with an arm to strike and a heart dead to all pity. Myself for myself is the motto which those days of agony have engraven into my heart. And at the end of the avenue there is daylight. Mine be the fault if I fail to reach it.

CHAPTER XXV.

A RIFT IN THE CLOUDS.

WE human beings are strange creatures. Yesterday morning I should have embraced with considerable eagerness any honourable means of trying my fate in a better or a worse world. This morning I have not the faintest desire for a less material or even an altered state of existence. My feet are upon the earth again, and the savour of living is as sweet as ever. I am one with my fellow-kind, and disposed to be friendly with all men. The exhilaration of last night has rather increased than abated. It is true that I had only a few hours' sleep, but I have risen perfectly refreshed. I have eaten my breakfast with most unusual appetite, and I find the flavour of my morning cigarette excellent. I have not the faintest desire to throw myself into the arms of Heine or

Owen Meredith or Coleridge, and to drift with them into the dark waters. My affinities with the literature of despair and the poetry of pessimism are suddenly sundered. If I felt like reading at all, I should probably take down Sterne, or one of the milder humorists. As I don't, I content myself with standing in a comfortable position before the fire in my little room, looking out across the market-place, bright with a day of unexpected sunshine, and listening for the shop-bell.

And, after all, what does it mean—the exhilaration of last night and the content of this morning? Just a gleam of hope, that is all. Just a little rift in the clouds which may close together again before evening. But I have sat so long in the bottomless pits of despair—so long have I suffered and endured in a darkness which held no promise of lightening, that by comparison the twilight of to-day is indeed welcome.

All is as vague and tangled to me as ever. I can see nothing clearly. There is nothing yet in the shape of a beacon light to guide me on ; but there is a difference between to-day and the days that have been. Whereas, before, the darkness was intense, so that I knew not which way to grope, and my hands were empty of any knowledge, to-day there is something in my grasp. It is only a tangled skein, but the clue is there, if I have only the wit to find it. There is definite work to be done—definite work leading to a definite end, and the man that is in me is kindled and fired by the knowledge.

Last night I put away my pride and wrote to Miss

Deighton, and an hour ago David started on his way to the Court with my letter. Before mid-day I shall have a reply. Will she grant my request, I wonder? I have asked her to come and see me—I have told her that I have news. I have entered into no explanation, yet I think that she will come.

Will there be a reaction to this light-heartedness of mine? Will twilight find me plunged once more in the icy waters of despair, more hard than ever to endure by reason of this temporary uplifting of spirit? or shall I have struggled one step further into the light? I cannot say. What may be in store for me, I cannot tell. Yet I am sanguine. I have a feeling that the old misery has fallen away, like a discarded garment, and I pray that it may be so.

A ring at the shop bell. I throw my cigarette away, brush the ashes from my coat, and hasten out. It is Olive Walsingham.

I am not really pleased to see her, for somehow there is growing up in my mind a doubt—a doubt whether, after all, we may be working to the same end. In a certain way I am deceiving her, and I am not sure but that a dim sense of it is dawning upon her. Would it be safe to tell her the truth, I wonder? It might be rash, but I should feel a great deal more comfortable. Has she really any suspicions of it? If she has, I think I will tell her all. It may be better.

‘Good-morning,’ I say pleasantly. ‘No cold, then?’

‘No; I am quite well. Not even tired,’ she answers.

I do not want to have her come into my sitting-room, so I ask her to sit down here. She subsides timidly into my little cane-bottomed chair, and fixes her eyes upon me. She is evidently not quite at her ease.

'I have been thinking over all that happened last night,' she begins slowly. 'It is very strange and very mysterious.'

'What part of it particularly?' I ask.

'The part which concerns you chiefly, I think,' she answers. 'So your name is not Martin, and you are a gentleman, after all. I like your real name better. Norman Scott is quite pretty.'

I have been hoping that she did not hear everything that passed between Rudd and myself, but it seems that she has. If she knows my real name, she may learn my story at any moment. Better, perhaps, to tell it to her.

'It is quite true that I have another name,' I admit. 'As I told you last night, I am like your brother. I did not care to drag a good one down with me.'

'Perhaps so,' she answers. 'And perhaps—perhaps—'

'Perhaps what?' I ask, looking at her keenly.

'You may have another reason.'

'Granted,' I admit as carelessly as possible. 'It does not matter, does it? It does not—'

'Concern me. I do not know. I have been wondering.'

I look steadily at her. She is evidently struggling with an excitement which she finds it very hard to

suppress. Her hands, and even her lips, are trembling. Her face is white, and her eyes, which seem riveted upon mine, watch eagerly every change in my expression. I have an instinctive feeling that there is some trouble in store for me.

‘I have been wondering,’ she continues, leaning across the counter so that those searching black eyes come very close indeed to mine, ‘wondering why you have taken so much trouble to help me find my brother, why you have become so interested in the search.’

‘Can you not give me credit for doing so much for you out of good-nature?’ I ask, gravely enough, but with an uncomfortable sense of playing the hypocrite.

She shakes her head.

‘No; I do not believe in good-nature—in man’s good-nature,’ she answers with a cynicism which comes strangely from her childish lips. ‘A man will do anything for a woman he cares for or loves, but there are very few who will do anything at all for one if he has no interest in her. Now, you—you do not care for me, Mr.—Martin?’

Her voice has dropped a little, and I cannot be deaf to its sadness, nor can I keep as unconcerned as I would wish to appear under the steady scrutiny of those soft dark eyes.

‘Miss Olive, you——’

She lays her thin, tiny white hand upon my lips—a queer little gesture which effectually checks my speech.

‘You can spare me any polite speeches, please,’

she says. 'I do not like them. They hurt me. You do not care for me, not one single little bit. Even the stupidest girl cannot be deceived in such a matter, unless she chooses to wilfully blind herself; and I know. I do not wonder at it. On the contrary, I should be surprised if you did. You do not seem to me to be the sort of man who—cares for anyone easily. You are—a little hard-hearted. Is it not so?'

Her eyes have grown dim, and towards the close of her speech her voice trembles. Of course, it is all very ridiculous, but I find it exceedingly hard to keep from consoling her. She is so forlorn-looking, so sad, and so pretty. But my wiser self tells me that my greatest safeguard is to remain as hard-hearted as she thinks me to be. So I take no notice of that pleading look, and I do not clasp the little hands which are half stretched out to me. I say nothing.

'It is no matter, no matter at all,' she goes on, turning her head away at last, and slowly drying her eyes. 'I am very foolish, but I am not altogether silly. I do not forget that I am here for an object, and an object which means everything in life to me. I am here to find my brother. I come to you by the merest accident, and I confide in you. I find you willing, more than willing, to help me. We took that little expedition together last night. You were as much interested in it as I. Why, you were not thinking about my brother or of me, when you stood face to face with that man by the gate in the pine-

grove; and you told him your name, and he fell back as though he had seen a ghost. You were not thinking of me or of my affairs when you told him that your day was to come, and when you waved your hand to him, and found his gun pointed at your heart. What does it mean? You have had my confidence. Give me yours. What is my brother to you?’

The girl has changed again. She is standing up now, and her dark face is clouded all over with distrust and suspicion. I draw a little breath of relief. I find her easier to deal with so.

‘I am not sure, when I see you looking like that, that you deserve my confidence,’ I say gently. ‘In any case, I have not merited your suspicion. It is true that, in seeking to help you, chance has brought me in contact with matters interesting to myself. Sit down, and I will tell you in a few words the story of my life, and why I am not bearing my own name.’

She is as easily calmed as roused. She takes the chair to which I have pointed, and looks up at me expectantly.

‘You have heard me speak of a terrible event which happened at Deignton Court about the time that your brother was there,’ I begin. ‘I think I told you about it. Sir Humphrey Deignton was murdered one night in the bedroom of one of his guests, and the mystery has never been cleared up.’

‘Yes,’ she says eagerly; ‘go on.’

‘Well, Olive, I was one of the guests in the house

that night ; not only that, but it was in my room that the deed was done. It is true that I was not really in the house at all ; I had left for London two hours before, but I have never been able to prove it. So, you see, suspicion fell upon me. There was not quite enough evidence to have me arrested and charged with the crime, but there was enough to cause my friends to shrink from me as though I were a leper, to destroy my reputation, and to wreck my future. Even now I am believed to be the murderer of my father's oldest friend—a man from whom I had never received anything but the greatest kindness. If I were to assume my own name and call myself Norman Scott, people would cross the road to avoid me ; they would hound me from place to place ; they would be fearful of breathing the very air which was contaminated with my presence.'

'You !' she cries incredulously ; 'you a murderer ?'

'That is the opinion of nine-tenths of the people who read the trial,' I continue. 'If you or I had read the same chain of evidence against any other man, we should doubtless have believed the same thing. It happens, however, in this case that the minority are in the right. I am innocent ; and, being innocent and desirous of proving it, I have come down here under an assumed name——'

'To try and find out the murderer,' she interrupts, looking up at me with her face all alight with a sweet womanly sympathy. 'Oh, if only I could help you ! If only I could help you ! It is cruel !'

'You understand now that, when last night we

seemed to stumble on some mystery altogether unconnected with your brother, I was very much interested. I began these inquiries and this search wholly on your account, Olive. By accident, we seem to have drifted off the path of our investigation, and to have discovered something which will doubtless be more valuable to me than to you ; but you must not blame me for that.'

'I do not ! oh, I do not !' she protests eagerly.

'And you are quite satisfied now ?'

'Quite. I was mean and horrid to want satisfying. Forgive me ; I am very penitent.'

I am obliged to leave her for a moment or two to attend to a customer who has just entered, and is staring curiously at the little black figure in my chair. I get rid of her as quickly as possible ; but just as I am leaning over to speak to Olive again, David enters with a note in his hand. It is the reply from Miss Deighton.

I take it from him and tear it open, letting the envelope fall upon the counter. It is very short.

'DEIGHTON COURT,

'Wednesday morning.

'Expect me this afternoon. Am glad to have your letter.

'K. D.'

I thrust it into my pocket with a smile. Then I turn towards Olive again and find that her eyes are fixed upon the envelope which lies before her on the counter.

‘Is not that—Miss Deignton’s writing?’ she asks.

I take up the envelope, frowning. It was careless of me to have left it there.

‘Yes.’

‘And—and she knows, of course, all that you have told me—about yourself?’

‘Yes, she knows.’

Olive looks at me for a moment oddly. The childishness has fallen away from her, and there is a light in her big dark eyes which troubles and perplexes me. Then she suddenly rises, and I am conscious of a distinct feeling of relief.

‘I think I understand,’ she says softly. ‘Good-bye. You have been very kind to me.’

She lets down her veil, and walks out of the shop and away across the market-place with bent head and slow, deliberate footsteps. I watch her until she is out of sight, and I do not think that she means to come back to me again.

But I have not seen the last of Olive Walsingham.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN UNSEEN TRAGEDY.

I AM looking for her all the afternoon, but it is dusk before she comes. Mrs. Ransome has been in and prepared my tea, and the door is closed upon her

again. She will not be back for an hour, when she comes to clear away. I have just lit my lamp, and, with a book in my hand, am about to sit down, when I hear the sound of wheels outside. I hasten into the little shop and find her already entering.

David has just gone out with a bottle of medicine, and we are alone. She does what she has not done before : she holds out her hand.

I take it and hold it as long as I dare. Her lips are parted in a bright smile, and the fast driving has given a brilliant and unusual colour to her cheeks.

‘I was rude here yesterday,’ she says frankly. ‘Horribly rude ! I have no excuse, for really it was unjustifiable. But you have forgiven me, haven’t you ?’

‘Long ago. It was nothing.’

‘It was something. It was a good deal. I was foolish enough to think that you had been amusing yourself with that poor child, and I am ashamed of myself now for harbouring such an idea for a moment.’

‘It is forgotten,’ I tell her. ‘Let us think no more of it.’

‘Where is your housekeeper ?’ she asks suddenly.

‘Gone to attend to her own family wants. I do not keep a resident one, you know.’

She looks towards the door of my sitting-room and back at me, smiling.

‘Why don’t you invite me in ? Is little Olive to be the only privileged one ?’

I do not need to answer her, for she must see in my

face how glad I am. I lift the counter flap, and open the door, and we pass through together.

She looks round with undisguised interest, and laughs as she sinks into my easy-chair.

‘This is a most unfortunate visit for you,’ she declares. ‘My sympathy for you in your terrible privations is beginning to evaporate. How cosy you are! What a lot of books, and what a pretty tea-service! Is there enough tea for two, I wonder?’

I point to the tea-caddy, and place another chair at the table.

‘We can replenish *ad libitum*. Do you really mean that you will have some tea?’

‘Of course I do. I’m positively dying for some!’ she answers, seating herself with the utmost composure, and peering forward to look into the milk-jug.

‘Cream, I declare! You most luxurious of postmasters! What would they say if they knew it at St. Martin’s-le-Grand? Sit down, please; it worries me to see you standing up.’

She pours out the tea, and somehow I find myself sitting opposite to her. She is certainly more at her ease than I am. I cannot help but find it bewildering to have her so close to me in a chamber peopled many and many a night with thoughts and visions of her. But if it is a little bewildering, it is also very pleasant.

‘Now tell me the news, all of it,’ she directs. ‘How good the tea is!’

‘Do you know anything of Mr. Callender?’ I ask with seeming irrelevance.

'Mr. Stephen Callender, of the White House, do you mean?'

'Yes.'

She shakes her head.

'Nothing very much, except that he is a dreadful invalid; something wrong with the tissues of his brain, I believe. He is very old, very unsociable, and very harmless. You asked me about him once before.'

'Have you ever seen him?'

'Not very lately. Lady Deighton goes to sit with him occasionally, but I have not been for years. He doesn't care much for young people.'

'Do you know where he came from?'

'I haven't the least idea. He came to the White House about five years ago, and there he has been ever since. He did try to get over to Germany and go on to Egypt once, I remember, about two years ago, but when he got to London he found the travelling too much for him, and he came back again. He was a distant relative or connection of my father's, I believe.'

'And you are sure that he has been at the White House for five years?' I remark, a little disappointed.

'Yes, longer than that, I believe. I remember his coming quite well. Pass the bread-and-butter, please. What have you got in your head about Mr Stephen Callender? He's the most harmless old man you ever saw. He's very infirm, and he wears goloshes and spectacles almost as ugly as yours. It's my private opinion that he's been a——'

‘Have you seen anything more of Mason?’ I ask.

‘Nothing.’

‘Have you ever wondered where he came from that night?’

‘Often.’

‘Have you ever tried to guess?’

‘No. Have you any idea?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where?’

‘The White House.’

She is silent for a minute. The idea is evidently a new one to her.

‘Any reasons?’ she asks.

‘Yes.’

‘What are they?’

‘Yesterday afternoon, his wife, Mrs. Mason, who has been my housekeeper since I came here, absconded without the least warning. I was interested in her disappearance, and I traced her to one of two places.’

‘Well, what were the two places?’

‘One was Deighton Court, the other the White House.’

‘She is not at Deighton Court.’

‘Then she is at the White House.’

Miss Deighton is beginning to show more signs of interest. She sets down her cup, and looks at me fixedly.

‘I will ask you how you know that, in a moment,’ she says. ‘First, tell me, have you any idea

why she left you so suddenly? Does she suspect you?’

‘She may do. She may have been a spy upon me all the time. But I think not. I have another theory.’

‘What is it?’

‘A few moments before she left she was in this room laying the cloth for my lunch, and I was talking to Olive Walsingham in the shop. The door was open; she could easily have overheard our conversation.’

‘What was it about?’

‘I was proposing to take her in, and to ask Mrs. Mason certain questions before her.’

‘About what?’

‘Her brother.’

‘And Mrs. Mason could have overheard this?’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘And your theory is that, sooner than be asked those questions, she left you.’

‘It is feasible, at any rate, however odd it may seem. She left me without a second’s deliberation, and frightened almost to death. I have heard since that she was seen running towards her home without any hat, and looking like a ghost.’

‘And you say that you traced her——’

‘To the White House. Listen.’

I tell her the story of our night walk, and how at its close we were baffled, taking pains to dwell fully upon every slightest point. She listens in absolute silence until I have finished. Then I can

see that her interest is deeply aroused. Her first question touches the subject which is uppermost in my own mind :

‘You do not in any way connect Olive’s brother with——’

‘I do not,’ I interrupt. ‘I will tell you what seems to me probable. Mrs. Mason for days has been in a state of collapse. I believe that she knows everything. On the very day when Mason visited Deignton Court, she came here having all the appearance of a woman who had received some awful shock. She could scarcely move, and all the time she was on the verge of hysterics. Since then she has been only just able to get about, and there is no doubt that she has suffered terribly. It is just possible, then, that the bare thought of being questioned about events at Deignton Court at the time of the murder was too much for her, and she fled from it. She was just in that state when she needed only such a little thing as that to completely unnerve her.’

‘That may be so,’ she assents thoughtfully. ‘At any rate, it is reasonable. I am wondering about John Rudd. He is very honest, and was devoted to my father. I can’t think that he would be silent if he knew anything.’

‘John Rudd was an honest man when I knew him,’ I answer a little bitterly ; ‘but gold will buy a good deal, and Lady Deignton has plenty of it. He was faithful enough last night to those who are employing him.’

'I heard my stepmother say the other day that he is an excellent gamekeeper,' Miss Deighton remarks thoughtfully. 'I think that is the only time she has ever mentioned him.'

'He may be an excellent gamekeeper,' I answer; 'but it is as watchman, not as gamekeeper, that he is serving her now.'

'Listen!' she exclaims suddenly, lifting her forefinger. 'I thought so. Those are Lady Deighton's horses. She is coming here!'

There is the sound of a carriage drawing up outside with much commotion, and I rise to my feet.

'You are quite safe here,' I whisper. 'She cannot see you. I will go out.'

I enter the shop just as Lady Deighton sweeps in. She is wearing a long sealskin coat and turban and a thick veil. When she draws it up I am shocked at her appearance.

She does not offer me any greeting, but draws her glove off slowly.

'Give me telegraph forms and a pencil, if you please,' she says in a low tone.

I place them before her and wait while she writes out her message. When she has finished it she hands it to me to read over, and I do so aloud:

'To Manager, Stokes' Hotel, St. James's, London, W

'Reserve rooms to-day for Mr. Stephen Callender and servant. Will arrive about eight o'clock.'

I hand her the stamps, and receive the message back again without remark. Then I take it to the

instrument and despatch it. When I have finished, I find her still there.

‘I am waiting for you to congratulate me upon my appearance,’ she says in a hollow tone. ‘What do you think of me?’

She raises her veil a little higher. Her cheeks are sunken strangely, and there are deep-black lines under her eyes. Her face is perfectly colourless, almost livid. She is the sudden wreck of a beautiful woman.

‘I am grieved to see you looking so ill,’ I say truthfully.

‘Hypocrite!’

The word is scornfully hurled at me rather than spoken. She drops her veil and turns her back upon me. Half-way to the door, through which I am longing to see her pass, she pauses and looks over her shoulder. She seems undecided whether to speak again or not. Eventually she decides to do so.

‘You dare to pity me!’ she exclaims. ‘You whose work it is. Oh, Norman! Norman! you are crushing me into my grave!’

She has turned suddenly round. There is a gleam of the woman I once worshipped in her swimming eyes. My heart is beating fast.

‘Spare me! Oh, spare me, Norman!’ she cries. ‘See, I plead to you. Have mercy!’

‘How? What can I do? I——’

Suddenly her face changes. She drops her veil, and at the sight of her altered expression, the words die away upon my lips.

‘My servants are looking through the window,’ she

says, speaking without moving a muscle of her face. 'I must see you, and alone. You must come to me. You will not refuse me this, Norman? Think of old days, and answer me. You will come?'

'If you wish it, I must,' I answer. 'I cannot see what good there is to come of it, but it shall be as you will. Tell me when to come.'

'To-night, at nine o'clock,' she says briefly. 'I shall expect you.'

She drops her veil and sweeps out to her carriage. From my place behind the counter I can just see another visitor on her way across the market-place towards my shop—a sad little black figure, walking slowly, and with bent head. I recognise her with a frown of impatience. Am I to be robbed of my last few minutes with Miss Deighton?

I step back into the sitting-room. She is leaning back in my easy-chair with her eyes fixed upon the fire.

'At last!' I exclaim. 'And now——'

I break off in my speech, and Miss Deighton springs to her feet. We both look at one another in startled silence. The air seems full of horrible echoes—echoes of that piercing shriek which has rung out from the pavement outside the window. Such a sound I have never heard before, and pray God that I may never hear again. It is like the startled wailing of one of Dante's spirits stepping into an unexpected hell.

There is no repetition of it, and it is followed by the plunging of horses and the sound of wheels. Then I draw a long breath and spring to the door.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SUN SHINES ON MY HOPES.

IN half a dozen seconds I am out in the street, staring blankly up and down. I have some vague expectation of seeing a little crowd gathered around a fainting or a dying woman. There is nothing of the sort. The only object in sight is Lady Deighton's brougham disappearing in the distance. I gaze after it searchingly. The horses are going at their usual pace, and the coachman and footman are sitting unmoved upon the box. I abandon the idea of connecting in any way that awful shriek of agony with Lady Deighton. I remember her magnificent composure only a moment before, and I withdraw my eyes from her carriage. Suddenly I remember the little black figure whom not a minute ago I had seen crossing the market-place.

She is nowhere in sight. I look around very carefully ; she has completely disappeared. Bare-headed, I walk along the pavement and look into Mr. Mann's shop. She is not there. I cross the road, and look into Mr. Holmes'. It is empty. No one else seems to have heard the cry, for, save myself, there is no one in sight, and as for Olive, it seems as though the earth had opened and swallowed her up.

I give it up at last and go back to my sitting-room, where Miss Deighton is waiting for me impatiently.

'Well,' she asks breathlessly, 'is anyone hurt ? What was it ?'

I shake my head. I am feeling perfectly bewildered.

‘You saw how quickly I was in the street?’

‘Yes. I saw you pass the window.’

‘Well, then, there was not a soul in sight—not a soul. I could see both ways along the street and across the market-place. They were absolutely deserted. I looked in both of the shops. They were empty. Everyone round here must have been at tea, and no one besides ourselves seems to have heard the cry.’

Miss Deighton is a little pale.

‘Was there no cart or carriage in sight?’ she asks.

‘Only Lady Deighton’s brougham. It was going at the usual pace, with the coachman and footman on the box.’

‘How far away was it?’

‘About at the church corner. Just turning up the hill. There is one thing more to tell you.’

‘Yes.’

‘When I came in here from the shop, Olive Walsingham was crossing the market-place towards here. When I rushed out after that horrible shriek she had completely disappeared. There was not a sign of her.’

We are both perfectly silent for a moment. Whatever our thoughts may be, we do not exchange them, then.

‘What was my stepmother talking to you about?’ she asks, after a long pause. ‘What does she want?’

‘To bribe me to turn back my hand,’ I answer.
‘She is afraid, mortally afraid.’

‘To bribe you!’

There is a light in her eyes which is almost cruel, and the corners of her mouth are tightly compressed. She waits for me to say more.

‘Yes. Not with money, it is true; but by the sight of her sufferings, by——’

‘You have not—you would never listen to her!’

‘Not to her, nor to any living person,’ I answer, with a sudden vigour in my tone. ‘I have borne this miserable burden too long already. I am sick of slinking through life under a false name, of vegetating in this wretched hole, an alien from all the thunder and excitement of life. Listen to her! Not I! I am adamant! I have been down in hell long enough. Sometimes—sometimes I am bold enough to dare to hope that heaven itself will be opened before me, when the day of my justification shall come.’

Her eyes have fallen before mine. She has turned away; but is not her very silence encouragement? I take a quick step forward. My arms are outstretched, and a very torrent of words is upon my lips; and then I stop short, my arms fall to my sides, and a little smothered groan escapes from me. Have I not registered in my heart a vow that no word of this shall pass my lips until the shadow has passed from across my life? My vow shall be kept. Yet these few moments of intense silence have their meaning for both of us. She, too, has

yielded herself up to their influence. She makes no effort to escape from them by any spasmodic attempt at outside conversation. It is I who at last do that.

‘I had forgotten. I have not yet told you the news,’ I say in a low tone.

‘News?’

She half turns round, but she does not yet meet my eyes. In that dim twilight her face seems to me wonderfully soft and womanly. The proud mouth has relaxed—is even quivering a little at the corners, and there is colour in her cheeks. I do not continue for a moment, for I am watching her with a keen, deep glow of pleasure. My little room is sanctified to me for ever after by those few minutes of her presence.

‘Did you say “news”?’ she repeats softly. ‘Tell me.’

I make an effort and collect myself. ‘Yes; Stephen Callender has left the White House.’

My tone has changed with the current of my thoughts. I am no longer trembling upon the edge of a volcano; I am back again amongst the meshes, grappling with my fate. Those few minutes have passed, but their memory will remain for ever.

‘How do you know?’ she asks, also in a changed tone, but still without raising her eyes to mine.

‘Lady Deighton has just sent off a telegram to an hotel in London, ordering rooms to be reserved for Mr. Stephen Callender and servant to-night.’

‘It is strange,’ she says thoughtfully.

‘It is more than strange,’ I answer. ‘Only an hour

ago I was asking you who Stephen Callender was. Only last night we traced Mrs. Mason to his abode, and found it strangely guarded by Lady Deighton's servants. To-day, Stephen Callender, an old infirm man, has left the place and gone to London. I do not understand it. It is incomprehensible.'

'You say that Lady Deighton told you this herself, and put the telegram into your hands, with the London address?' she asks.

'Yes.'

'That is to say, she has almost gone out of her way to let you know this man's movements. If this is so, how can he have left here to avoid you?'

'Quite true,' I answer.

'If he has really gone to London—if this has not been written solely to deceive you.'

'What is your opinion?'

'I have no opinion,' she says, slowly buttoning her glove. 'It is a premonition.'

'And it is?'

'That Stephen Callender is still at the White House,' she says deliberately; 'and before this time to-morrow I mean to do my best to see him.'

'Alone?'

'Yes, alone.'

'May I——'

'No! If Stephen Callender knows anything of my father's murder, it is his daughter who shall wring the knowledge from him. I am going now. Many thanks for the tea.'

‘We may meet again,’ I say. ‘I am coming to Deighton Court.’

‘Coming to Deighton Court! When?’

‘To-night.’

‘Why?’

‘Because Lady Deighton made me promise to. She asked me in such a manner that I could not refuse.’

She shrugs her shoulders. ‘Do you think it wise?’

‘I think that no harm can come of it, at any rate.’

‘Nor any good.’

‘Of that I am not so sure,’ I answer thoughtfully. ‘Lady Deighton is on the verge of breaking down. God forbid that I should seek to entangle her in any confession, save an honest and a free one; but if of her own accord—and she must have a conscience, after all—she should disclose the truth——’

I pause. I do not feel able to finish my sentence. It seems at this moment as though the goal of my hopes is hard at hand. My eyes flash, and my voice trembles, but Miss Deighton shakes her head.

‘You do not know my stepmother,’ she says quietly

I walk out with her to the door, and she lingers there for a moment, looking up and down and across the dimly lit market-place, with a half-frightened expression on her face.

‘I must be nervous to-night,’ she says, shuddering a little; ‘the echoes of that horrible cry seem to be

in the air even now. Walk across the market-place with me.'

David has just returned from his tea, and is watching us with a surprise which is not decreased when he sees me take up my hat and leave the shop with Miss Deighton. The men, too, in the stable-yard at the Deighton Arms gaze at us curiously.

'We are getting a little reckless,' I remark, as I hand her up into the cart. 'I am afraid these people will talk.'

'You are already an object of suspicion,' she laughs, as she takes the reins from the groom. 'People say some very queer things about their postmaster. Never mind; I have a presentiment that the end is not very far off.'

'God grant it!' I murmur fervently. 'I am tired of masquerading. Shall I see you to-night?'

'If it is possible, yes.'

The groom stands away from the horse's head, and she gives me a little farewell nod as the cart rattles off into the darkness. Then I go back to my little shop, and mix drugs and sort the mail like a man in a dream. I too have a notion that the great climax of my task is not far off.

I am haunted by Lady Deighton's gray, terror-stricken face. In her heart lies the knowledge that would set me free. How long before I shall become possessed of it? It may be to-night.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ASHES OF DEAD JOYS.

IT is not until I stand face to face with Lady Deighton that I realize the nature of the ordeal to which I have committed myself. All the way from Market Deighton, across the bare common-land and along the tall-hedged lanes, my thoughts have been busy with my own affairs. I have allowed myself the delicious luxury of a complete abandonment to the most sanguine imaginings. I have fancied myself a free man once more, stepping back into a world always fascinating to me, and with the full joy of living beating once more in my heart. For I was never made of the stuff whereof anchorites are fashioned. My solitude has been hateful to me ; I have never found it for a moment endurable. I have none of the inherent reserve of the student and the man of letters. Nature meant me for a worker amongst my fellows, and my profession has done all that was requisite towards developing the practical part of myself. I am no dreamer or maker of books. It has been in the keen fray and the mighty struggle of intellect against intellect that I have found my happiness. And this forced abandonment of all my ambitions, of all the great battles with science, which were the joy of my life, has been of itself, apart from its hideous cause, a source of abject misery to me. And now I am like a lost wanderer amongst the mountains, stretching up my hands to a great

rift in the black clouds through which the daylight comes streaming down, and breathing out a passionate prayer that deliverance may indeed be at hand. And in these hours of waiting for the fuller daylight which means salvation I am yielding myself up to a foretaste of the joy to come. I am busy planning out the whole course of my justification. I have even dared to look beyond, to see myself in the new life which the future may hold for me: holding my place once more amongst those whose companionship was once my pride, and pressing onwards toward the realization of many of the high ambitions of my younger days. And mingled with all my dreams, all my hopes, is one so sweet and so dear to me that, as I suffer my thoughts to linger upon it only for a moment, all life seems flooded with sunshine, my heart quickens, and my feet seem to be walking upon air. Oh, there is joy in the world yet—recompense even for all my sufferings, and the way at last seems clear before me! I have not once thought of the woman whose suffering must be my triumph. I have not wasted a single thought upon her. I have given myself up altogether to the unaccustomed luxury of castle-building.

And now the critical moment has come, the moment which, above all others, is to decide my fate; and I find myself face to face with this woman in whose features are written all the signs of a consuming agony. She comes towards me from the deeper shadows of her chamber into the rose-lit space where I am standing behind the carefully

shaded lamp with folded arms, and for a full minute she speaks no word to me, nor I to her. And for her part she is wise. There is that in her face which she knows full well to be far more eloquent than speech.

Who shall say that Nature is always just in the brand she sets upon our countenances? In that long searching gaze which passes between us I read in every feature the agony through which the woman has passed. Yet the fierce traces of those guilty sufferings, of those long days of self-reproach, have robbed her of none of her beauty. There is a hot-house fragility about her appearance, a hectic flush upon her cheeks, and a bright—an unnaturally bright—gleam in her eyes, which are mute but touching appeals for compassion. The hollows under her eyes are scarcely disfigurements; the wasted hand, on which the rings hang loose, has borrowed a dazzling whiteness from the mental disease which seems to be consuming her. And as she moves across the room to me, in her loose flowing gown, I cannot but notice that her limbs have lost their roundness and her step all the buoyant grace which in the old days had distinguished her wherever she appeared.

It is when I see her thus, and think of her as she was then, a woman without peer or rival in her gay passionate beauty, that my heart grows faint with fear. Not that I fear any revival of my old folly: no power on earth could bring that to life again; it has been trampled out too rudely, and buried too

deep. But what man on earth can remain without a single spark of human tenderness for the woman who once, however unworthily, filled the world of his thoughts and reigned over his fancy? Pity is swiftly begot of these seeds of tenderness—pity against which I must steel myself in invulnerable armour, for my honour's sake.

She sits down in a low chair by the fire with a little gesture of weariness, and takes up a screen from the table by her side. Whilst she holds it before her face the shadows encompass her, and I see nothing but a pair of large luminous eyes shining out of the gloom like stars, and ever seeking mine. Even this is easier to bear than the sight of her face.

‘Will you not sit down?’ she asks in a tone so low that it hardly reaches my ears.

I shake my head. I do not answer her in words. I want to be quite sure of the steadiness of my voice before I use it. I do not want her to detect the slightest sign of weakness in me.

‘Your old self,’ she remarks, with the ghost of a smile. ‘You always would stand over me when you talked. Strange that I should remember, is it not?’

And still I do not answer her. What is the use? I have not come here to bandy recollections, or to exchange such remarks as these. She knows it as well as I. I am here at her bidding. Let her say what she has to say.

There is a short pause. Then she looks over at me, and lowers her screen.

‘It is good of you to come,’ she says wearily. ‘I wonder whether I did well to ask you? I do not know that I have strength enough left to say those things which I have in my heart to say. Yet I am glad that you came.’

‘I have come against my own will, and against my own judgment,’ I say in a tone the hardness of which surprises even me. ‘If you have anything to say to me, I am here to listen to it. I fear that you have been ill.’

She gives a scornful little laugh. For a moment the screen falls upon her lap, and her face is touched by the firelight. It has not improved. That laugh has brought an ugly hard look into it. Then the screen is up again, and I see it no more. But I do not forget the look.

‘You fear that I have been ill. You fear! As if you cared. Norman Scott, you have taught me a lesson that has eaten like iron into my soul. A little more than two years ago you were my devoted—what shall I call it?—admirer. From your lips I heard all the usual platitudes. To be with me was the summit of all happiness. The hours spent away from my side were hours spent in purgatory. All other women were ciphers. You were distracted between what you called your love for me and your sense of honour. And now—now that I am friendless and alone in the world—when even ordinary kindness from you would be sweet to me, you have become my bitter persecutor. You, Norman Scott, of all men in this wide world!’

‘I am not your persecutor,’ I answer firmly. ‘I want nothing but justice.’

‘It is false! You have nothing before you but the hope of shifting the burden which you are not man enough to bear yourself upon the shoulders of a weak woman. Ask yourself what you are doing. Nay! I will tell you. You know that in the eyes of the world there are only two of us who could have been guilty of Sir Humphrey’s murder. One of these is a woman—a woman without a friend or relation in the world—a woman whom it is safe to strike at, because there is no one to defend her. And you say to yourself: She is helpless; I will fix the crime upon her, and I will escape myself. And so you watch me. You set a spy upon my actions; you weave a skilful net, into which some day, and very soon now, you are hoping to draw me. And all the while I seem to hear the echo of your voice as you leaned over my chair, scarcely two years ago, in that little room in Bruton Street, and implored me to see no callers for just one hour—to let you sit there and talk to me. And you sat there, with your horses waiting below, and your watch on the table, until you were compelled to tear yourself away. It makes you frown now, does it, to be reminded of all the foolish things you said and did for my sake? How noble! how chivalrous! How like a man!’

‘Lady Deignton, I am sorry that you should pain both yourself and me by dragging up memories of a past which we have both outlived,’ I say, making a great effort at calmness. ‘I want nothing but the

baldest justice. I do not desire any harm to come to you ; but what I do want is this : I want—if this deed lies at your door—full and ample confession. I would not have you punished if I could help it. I would give you time to get to the uttermost corners of the earth. But justice I want ; and justice I will have ! What have I done that I should suffer hell for another's sake ? It is not you against whom I am plotting. I struggle only towards the light ; and if, when my turn comes, the light falls upon you, what am I to blame ? If you are guilty, confess it to me now. If you are innocent, what have you to fear ?

‘Everything—whether I am guilty or not. It is easy to create suspicion against anyone. Sooner or later your efforts will create suspicion against me, and when once it is kindled, the blaze will come. Oh ! I know how they will talk ; how the noble army of gossipers will enjoy the sensation of picking a woman's name and honour to pieces. Norman Scott, come out of the shadows, and stand where I can see your face. Stand there, and listen to me !’

A sudden passion is vibrating in her tone and blazing in her eyes. She has thrown down the screen and is standing up before me, with a dull red spot burning in her cheeks. It is the supreme moment. Now or never she will speak. And with that conviction born of her sudden access of passion forcing its way into my senses, the terrible dramatic intensity of the moment is lost upon me. All the lurid background of the confession or denunciation

which I am throbbing to hear has no significance for me. I wait only for the sense of the words which burst upon me like a thunderstorm.

‘Norman, listen to me! We are alone. Suppose for a moment that the thought in your heart is true. Suppose that I did murder my husband that night. Do you hear? Suppose that I did it, I say! How dare you be the one to raise the first stone to cast at me! You who day by day with tender looks and loving words sinned against him and wronged me! You who sought to steal from him who counted you his friend what he esteemed his most precious possession! You who deliberately sought to efface his image from my heart, and paint your own there instead! Listen! You have driven me to bay. Suppose I tell you now that you have succeeded. Suppose I tell you now that for love of you, and believing in your love for me, I killed Sir Humphrey! What have you to say to that? Are you so guiltless as to dare to become my persecutor and my accuser? Who is the moral murderer, then, you or I? Answer me that, Norman. Ah, I see you flinch; I see you turn pale! And well you may. Read the past for a moment in that light. Read your own actions; mark your own conduct, hunting me down like a bloodhound, for a crime which, if this right hand indeed committed it, lies at your door, not mine. If there was ever hate in my heart towards my husband sufficient to make me seek to compass his death, who planted it there? You! You hypocrite! You coward! You come here and talk to me of

your honour and your name, as though both were precious and unspotted things. You whine at your mild sufferings as though you yourself were a martyr, immaculate and sinless. Have you ever asked yourself in what esteem the world will hold you should you gain your end? Oh, the folly of a man! Hand me over to justice as my husband's murderer, and in the heart of every man and woman in this country your rightful place will be by my side. What you now complain of as suspicion will become loathing. Fool! away with you! I have pleaded to you once in vain. I do so no longer. Away, and do your worst! I fear you no more than--this!

She dashes the daintily-embroidered screen on the floor between us, and waves me away with a gesture of supreme and magnificent contempt. Her head is thrown back, and her eyes are afire with the scorn which has trembled in her words. Her lips are perfectly bloodless and white, and by the rustling of the loose clinging robe which she is wearing, I know that every limb is shaking with a consuming passion. And I too am sorely troubled and oppressed with a great overwhelming sense of shame. The ghost of those days of my folly has risen up against me indeed; but the crop is bitterer than the seed. There is a lump in my throat, and a film before my eyes. I call upon my manhood in vain. My tongue refuses its office. I cannot speak. I lean my arms upon the wide chimneypiece and bury my head there.

For some time I do not move or answer. The

wild frenzy of her words has made havoc with my reason. I seem powerless to struggle against the dark waters which are closing around me.

And then she comes close to me, so close that I feel her warm breath upon my cheek, and her hand rests upon my bent shoulders. Her voice is softer, but the bitterness is still there.

‘Norman, have I hurt you much? I cannot help it. Take one step more forward in our imaginings. Imagine that I am indeed this guilty woman, and that I have sinned for the love of the man who tempted me. I turn to him in the after-days of sorrow and remorse for comfort, for tenderness, for protection. Picture to yourself that man, whose passionate whispers still ring in my ears, turning coldly away from me, leaving me alone and unfriended, nay, even setting himself with deliberate fiendishness to bring my sin home to me. Imagine him for whom I sinned become my accuser, holding aloof from all my advances, looking at me in horror, and calmly working for my destruction that he may clear his own name from all suspicion. Only picture it to yourself, Norman. A *fin-de-siècle* chivalry, is it not?’

I turn upon her, stung into a desperate calmness.

‘Cora, God only knows whether there is one grain of truth in this hideous catalogue of suppositions of yours. Yet, listen to me. You have had your say—here is mine. I do not deny that in the days you speak of I imagined myself desperately in love

with you. You were a very beautiful woman, and you flattered me by preferring me before a crowd of admirers. You were, too, the first woman of any attractions whatever whom fate had thrown across my path. So far as regards my age, I was a man ; so far as regards my experience of your sex, I was a boy. You did what you liked with me. You chose that I should fancy myself in love with you, and I did fancy myself in love with you. It is true that we were together a great deal more than was good for either of us. I blame myself for it, of course, but with your larger experience I blame you as much. And you know this : you know that my lips have never touched yours, that they have never spoken one serious sentence which you could construe as temptation. We said and did many things that were foolishly sentimental, but there was a barrier which was never crossed. I suffered, I admit it ; but to the end I was able to look Sir Humphrey in the face, knowing that of any thought or any design against his honour I was innocent. Ask yourself, Cora, from your memories of those days, ay, down to the very night of your husband's death—ask yourself who was the tempter, and who the tempted of us two.'

For once her eyes fall before mine. I continue, encouraged by my momentary victory :

'Yet though my conscience is not so foully besmirched as you would have it, I must pay the penalty of my folly, if my folly lies at the foundation of this horrible crime. Face to face with me, Cora,

and face to face with God, confess to me now that this deed was yours, done as you have told me in a paroxysm for love of me, and my hand is for ever stayed. I will take up my burden and carry it to the end, and you shall see me no more. Only I leave this room and you for ever, and God keep us for ever apart.'

Her eyes are full of fear, and a gray pallor is in her cheeks.

'I will not confess!' she whispers hoarsely. 'This may be a trick.'

'You have no fear of that,' I answer sternly. 'You know me better. Confess your crime, and the manner of it, and you are free, so far as I am concerned, for the rest of your life. I will pledge my word to raise no hand against you directly or indirectly. Only I will have the whole truth, I will know the mystery of the White House, and of Stephen Callender. I will know why Sir Humphrey was in my room, and why you followed him there. I will know why Olive Walsingham cries out in the street at the sight of you, and why you carry her off. I will have every piece of this puzzle put in its proper place by you, and then, so far from moving against you, if you are ever in need of help which my arm can render, it shall be yours. Only I will be convinced.'

The fire and majesty have died out of her. She has sunk into a chair, with her face half hidden from me.

'What do you know—what have you to do with

Stephen Callender and the White House ?' she falters. 'What have they to do with this ?'

'That is what I desire to know,' I answer calmly.

'There is nothing to tell you about Stephen Callender.'

'Confess to your crime, then. Look me in the face and tell me that it was done in a moment of madness, for my sake. Let me have every detail, so that I can fit everything into its proper place and prove your words. Do this, and I will keep my word. I will leave the country, and you shall never see my face again, unless you need my help.'

'And if I—do not ?'

'Then the day will soon come when, without any help from you, I shall have solved this riddle ; and I make you no promises for that time. To-night I make you an offer. To-morrow my strength may have waned. Be wise for yourself, and confess.'

'I will await that day, whenever it may be,' she answers suddenly. 'I have no confession to make to you, Norman Scott. Come to me when you hold in your hands the answer to the riddle you are so sure of solving. Till then, go ! I pray to God that I may never see your face again. It was a cursed day for you, and for me, that ever we met.'

She throws herself face downwards upon a couch, and I accept my dismissal without a word. I go out once more from the four walls of that dainty chamber, a man made suddenly old, and stricken with a fear more awful than death. I dare not meet Katherine Deighton. I dare not look into her face. I have no

strength or manhood left to carry me through another ordeal. Without a word or a look to anyone, I pass in silence out into the night, and set my face towards Market Deignton.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN THE ARMS OF DESPAIR.

I DARE say that most of us, even those whose lives have been marked with little of the tragedy of life, carry in our hearts a sealed corner into which we never care to look, the memory of which we cannot even recall without a shudder. This walk home, and the long hours of the weary night which followed, will always remain such a memory with me.

It is dawn, and when the first faint flush of morning steals up from behind the hills yonder, I am still out, a wanderer around the silent, deserted little town. A slight frost has hardened the ground, and a silvery-gray mantle has fallen upon the housetops and lies across the fields. The air is keen and crisp, full of a healthful buoyancy which many a time has had its effect upon my spirits. Even in this hour of my bitter sorrow it has some influence upon me. I find myself struggling once more with this load of abject and passionate despair. I try to tell myself that all is not yet lost. It was a parable, that hideous, loathsome story to which I listened last night. As yet no definite word has stamped it with the hall-

mark of truth. I recall its weak points, its exaggerations, its tardy narration, and I strive hard to nerve myself towards resolute and absolute disbelief in it. What was my sin to merit so great a punishment as this? At such a crisis truth is naked of all reserve. I had listened to a woman who had flattered and tempted me; but on the threshold of sin I had turned back. In the gray twilight of that night whose end had been so hideous I had fled back to London, a conqueror. It was true that I had listened and dallied and hesitated, that I had suffered myself to drift towards evil, with my face turned resolutely and obstinately away. But, nevertheless, when the moment of trial arrived I had triumphed. Was it the justice of heaven, the justice of God, to bring upon me this awful retribution?

And as the morning gradually steals on, and the little town awakens, I become a calmer and a saner man. I look down at my soiled garments and feel my hot flushed cheeks, with a dim recollection that I have been walking about all night. Then I hurry home and let myself in unseen.

I am at my post as usual when the mail comes in, and the first letter of the little heap which I am preparing to sort drives away again my painfully-acquired composure. I gaze at it with fixed eyes, speechless and dazed, until at last David comes over to my side and reads the address over: 'Norman Scott, Esq., Post Office, Market Deighton.'

'I wonder who he is,' David remarks curiously. 'He don't live anywhere round here.'

I put the letter on one side and proceed with the sorting.

‘To be called for, no doubt. Go on with your work, David, and never mind the letters,’ I say sharply.

He does not look up again, and as soon as I have finished my task, I make my escape into the sitting-room, bearing the letter in my hand. I close fast the door, and with trembling fingers break the seal.

‘LITTLE BROOK STREET,
‘LONDON, W.

‘I have screwed up my courage to write to you, Norman, only after many vain endeavours and many broken resolutions. For an old man to confess himself in the wrong goes sorely against the grain, and I begin to feel myself a very old man, seventy-eight last birthday, and breaking up fast, as my doctors do not hesitate to say, behind my back. They brought me here twelve months ago, directly after my terrible trouble (of course you know of Edward’s death), and now I shall never go back again. It is one more amongst the many troubles which have fallen upon me during these last few years, that I must die in this poky house like a rat in a hole, rather than in my old bedchamber at Gorley Towers, where I can lie and watch the sea and the sky, and the rocks on which I played when I was a boy. I have outgrown this great city, with its gloom and roar and ceaseless noise ; and I lie here day by

day with my face to the wall, cursing that miserable hankering after life which dragged me away from home at my age in the vain hope that any doctor in this world can check what Nature has ordained.

‘Enough about myself. I write to you as an act of justice—a tardy one, you may say, coming as it does from my deathbed—but still with the desire to make you some amends, if perchance I, your eldest living relative and the head of our family, have been over-harsh in my judgment against you. God knows that these last two years have been heavy with misfortune and trouble for me. I have lost my son, and my son’s son. And this brings me to the subject concerning which I am writing you. You, Norman, have become my heir. It is you who, in the course of a few weeks, perhaps even a few days, must bear my name and reign in my stead. I cannot help it if I would. Nature has ordained that you should become the head of the family, and Nature’s decree is absolute. And therefore I write to you, Norman, and I charge you, whatever you may be doing, and wherever you may be, to come to me without pause or rest on the day on which you receive this letter. No more at present, for writing wearies me, and my eyes are weak. I do not hold you capable of nursing evil feelings against an old man tottering upon the verge of the grave, so I do not fear but that you will come. Only I say, come swiftly, for my time is short.

‘From your uncle,

‘REGINALD NORMAN SCOTT.’

After I have read the letter, I do not hesitate for a moment. I go straight into the shop and telegraph to head-quarters for someone to come at once and take charge of the office. I am compelled to leave, I say, to see a relation who is dying. There must be no delay. Then I go back into my sitting-room, and taking some note-paper from the drawer, I write to Katherine Deignton.

It is only a line or two, and I do not refer in any way to the events of last night. I am leaving Market Deignton, I tell her, for two days. It may be that I shall never return. But before I go I must see her. I implore her to come to me. There is something which I must say to her. I will not keep her long. Only let her come.

I send David away with the note, and prepare to wait for the reply with all the patience I can summon. At twelve o'clock I send for David's younger brother, who has just come out of school, and he stands behind the counter whilst I go up to my room, and, dragging out a portmanteau, commence to prepare for my journey.

In about a quarter of an hour I am called downstairs. It is a young lady, David's younger brother announces in a very audible shout. I hasten downstairs and into the shop. My half-framed hopes are dashed. It is Olive Walsingham.

A wave of trouble seems to be in the air. She, too, is pale, and there are dark rims under her eyes. She scarcely returns my greeting.

'May I go in there and speak to you?' she asks

piteously, nodding her head towards my sitting-room door. 'I will not keep you more than a minute.'

I lift the counter flap, and follow her into the sitting-room. I am in a very selfish frame of mind. Other people's troubles seem to me to be of very little account.

She stands nervously up against the table, and her eyes are full of tears. They are also full of something else, against which I resolutely steel my heart. I have no pity to spare for other people to-day. My heart is too heavy with my own cares.

'You have been so kind about helping me to find my brother,' she says suddenly, 'that I felt I must come and tell you. I have found him. I am going away to join him at once.'

I am interested in spite of my own woes.

'How did you hear about him?' I ask.

'Lady Deignton wrote to one of the servants who was at the Court when Lionel was, and found out his address. I am going to join him at once. I—I am so sorry!'

'Sorry! I should have thought that you would have been delighted to have found him,' I remark, a little bewildered.

'Yes, of course I am. But I meant that I was sorry to have given you all this trouble, and that walk the other night to the White House, all for nothing. He has never been there in his life. He is hundreds of miles away now.'

'No connection with Mr. Stephen Callender, then?' I ask quietly.

'Of course not. No; that has been a mistake all the way through,' she answers with nervous emphasis.

'By-the-by, you were outside here about five o'clock yesterday afternoon,' I remark abruptly. 'What frightened you so? I heard you shriek.'

She is ghastly pale, and her eyes are full of fear. Her little black-gloved hand is clutching the table as though she were afraid of falling.

'I—shriek—here! I was not here at all yesterday afternoon. It could not have been me. I was at home; I did not come out.'

'Think,' I add, watching her closely. 'Lady Deignton's carriage was in the street at the time. Are you sure?'

'Quite sure,' she answers resolutely. 'It must have been someone else. I was not out at all.'

I do not ask her any more questions about it, but I do not trouble to hide my disbelief in what she has told me. I think that she feels it, for she stands there looking the picture of abject distress.

'I am going away to-day,' she says in a minute or two.

'So am I,' I answer.

'For good?' she asks quickly.

I shake my head.

'For two or three days only. Perhaps a week.'

'Oh!'

It is odd, but it seems to me that she is disappointed at my answer. What difference can it make to her whether I remain here or not? Why should she want me away?

‘I came to tell you this at once,’ she goes on, ‘so that you need not waste any time making inquiries of Mr. Callender, at the White House, or anywhere else. You see that it’s useless, now that I have found him, is it not?’

‘Quite,’ I answer dryly. ‘I am glad that you have been so successful.’

She holds out her hand, which I do not for a moment perceive.

‘Won’t you shake hands with me?’ she asks, with a piteous little tremor in her tone. ‘I am going away, you know.’

I take her hand and hold it for a moment. ‘Of course I will,’ I say as kindly as I can. ‘Good-bye, or, rather, au revoir. We shall meet again some day, I have no doubt.’

She looks at me searchingly for a moment through a mist of tears, as though wondering whether those last words of mine are altogether careless. Then she drops her veil suddenly, and walks away.

As for me, I look after her with a bitter feeling in my heart. All women are surely false! Even this girl, to whom I have been kind, has come here with no other purpose than to lie to me.

CHAPTER XXX.

‘WHOSE GENTLE WILL HAS CHANGED MY FATE.’

IT is dusk before Katherine Deignton arrives. Two hours ago I completed all the preparations for my departure. Since then I have had nothing to do but wait.

At last she comes. I hear the clatter of wheels in the street, and hasten out of my private door to meet her. My ‘relief’ has arrived, and is in the shop attending to the postal work. I have finished with that for awhile.

Even in the agitation of seeing her, and knowing that it may be for the last time, I have an eye for the most trifling details connected with her appearance. I notice her smart little hat and long driving coat, and the pink colour underneath her veil, which tells of a rapid drive here. I notice, too, the groom’s look of surprise as he turns the horses round and drives slowly across the market-place to the inn, leaving us two together. And I notice, too, with a sinking heart that there is a certain amount of reserve in her greeting, amounting almost to sternness.

She follows me into my little room, and when I have turned up the lamp, looks with surprise upon my altered appearance ; for I have been obliged to unearth some remains of a long discarded wardrobe, and am wearing a black frock-coat and dark trousers, and a tall hat lies ready upon a chair.

‘You are going away?’ she remarks.

‘Yes.’

‘And not as the postmaster of Market Deignton?’

I take my uncle’s letter from my pocket and hand it to her. She reads it carefully through, with a little start at the address, and then hands it back to me.

‘I am glad,’ she says simply. ‘I have always felt that your family were a little cruel. This must make you more than ever anxious for our success.’

She is watching me keenly. I turn away with a little groan and bury my head in my hands upon the mantelpiece.

‘Something has happened,’ she says, drawing close to me. ‘Something more than this. Tell me. Remember, it is our compact. Last night, did she confess? You went away without asking for me, as we had arranged. Why?’

I turn and face her—a desperate man. Even to me my voice sounds curiously hollow and strained. It rings in my ears as the far-away echo of another man’s speech.

‘Something has happened—but not that. I am going away for good. My hand is stayed.’

‘Going away!’

She repeats my words incredulously, as one without understanding, with her eyes all the while fixed wonderingly upon my pale, haggard face.

‘Yes, I am going away. First, to do my duty to this old man, though God only knows what comfort I can offer him; and then—then to the furthest and most desolate corner of the earth, to make my way

down to hell as fast as body and soul will take me.' I add fiercely, 'I sent for you, hoping only for this—that the sight of my misery now might some day help you to think a little kindly of me; that some day you might cease to think of me only with contempt.'

There is a minute's deep silence between us, during which all outside sounds seem to gain a new and strange importance. Heavy footsteps pass by the curtained window along the pavement, and the rattle of a milk-cart upon the cobbles grows louder, and then dies away. In the shop someone is laughing; there is the jingle of money upon the counter, and a cheery good-night from some country customer. And in the foreground of these everyday sounds the silence in my little room, where not even a coal falls from the hearth, becomes strangely and horribly oppressive to me. I begin to fear that she will leave me with that look upon her face and without a word. I could have endured anything—the most passionate reproaches, the bitterest scorn—better than this cold, dull silence. When at last it is broken, although her voice is barren of all sympathy, of expression of any sort, I draw a long breath of relief.

'You must tell me everything.'

I meet her eyes, cold, censorious, and penetrating, and I shake my head.

'I can tell you nothing!' I cry bitterly.

'You have become that woman's tool, then—you whom I trusted, in whom I had faith! You have

resolved to become her secret accomplice. You break your honourable compact with me, to enter into a guilty one with her.'

'It is false! May God grant that I never see her face again!' I cry fervently.

She proceeds, without noticing me, with a scorn which rings in her tone and eats into my heart :

'And this is the man in whom I trusted. The man whom, of my own accord, I stepped forward and tried to save. You say that some day you hope that I may pity you. The day has soon come. I pity you now. I pity myself; but, most of all, I pity you.'

She moves away towards the door, drawing her skirts around her, as though the touch of any of my belongings would bring defilement. And then I, who have borne so much, find that my cup is overfull, and that I can bear no more. A sort of madness comes upon me. After all, what has been my sin to merit such punishment as this? My heart is on fire, and I stand at my full height and face her without flinching.

'You do well!' I cry passionately. 'You are like all your sex—so generous, so considerate, so long-suffering! You see a man whose soul is in torment, and you pour out your scorn upon him to make fresh fuel for the fire of his madness. What matter that he loves you? What matter that in these long nights of my purgatory I have sat over this fire and dreamed wildly—madly, if you like—of a day when my name should be washed clean, and I should dare to stretch

out my hands towards you and tell you of the sweet hope which had lightened my days of misery. You can spare me your curling lip and the flash of your dark eyes. Who knows my folly better than I? I see my dreams of all that is dear and precious in life to the heart of a man swept away for ever! I see myself henceforth a wanderer in strange countries, homeless, and for ever joyless, shut off from everything in life, both great and small, which goes to bring happiness or peace. And in these first moments of my utter loneliness, my utter misery, when the hell of my future lies blank and dreary before me, and the strings of my manhood are broken, it is you—the desire and hope of my days, whose image must for ever remain to torture me—you who come here to be the cruelest and hardest of my judges, to echo with your voice the world's scorn! You have spoken your message, and I have heard you. Now go! Away from me! If ever a prayer of mine is to be granted upon this earth, may I never see your face or the face of any of your sex again! Go!

I believe that I am as near insanity as a man can be and yet preserve the light of his reason. There are fires before my eyes and a burning like the burning of hot irons upon my temples. I am suddenly unconscious of foreground or background to my life.

And then, through the mists and fires which blind my eyes, I see her with her head still thrown back, and a deep rich colour staining her cheeks, slowly moving towards the door. It opens and closes. She has gone.

At last ! With a low deep cry of relief I sink into my chair, and turning my face towards the cushion, I bury my head in my arms. In a few moments my eyes are blinded once more—but this time with tears, and great sobs which I have no power to repress force their way past the lump in my throat. Thus alone am I saved from madness. The weight seems rolled away from my brain, and my temples burn no longer.

I lose all count of time. My fire burns low, and the great calm of an utter apathetic despair is settling slowly down upon me. Then suddenly the door from behind is opened softly, and a light footstep enters and pauses upon the threshold. It must be Mrs. Ransome's little girl.

'I shall not want anything more, tell your mother,' I say, without looking round. 'Run away now, please, and close the door ; I am busy.'

No answer. Suddenly there is the rustling of a silken skirt close at hand ; a soft arm is stealing round my neck, and a woman's warm breath is upon my cheek. The whole air seems suddenly full of the perfume of violets. I do not dare to move. It must be some dream. I must have fallen asleep over these dying embers and—yet——

A low voice in my ears, sweeter than the music of God's angels :

'Norman, forgive me ! Forgive me ! I will trust you—always !'

I do not move. I am listening to the beating of my heart, with half-closed eyes, yielding myself up to

the exquisite enchantment, fearing to look up or speak, almost to breathe, lest it should all dissolve before my eyes and I should wake into the old world of misery. And then a soft delicate hand is drawn lightly across my burning forehead, and a woman's glowing cheek suddenly rests for a moment against mine, firing my blood and pulses into a sudden burning consciousness. I stretch out my arms and lift my eyes. It is she ! She whose proud, half-averted face, wonderfully softened and touched with a strange new fire, is being drawn slowly down to mine. She whom my arms are encircling with a passion which sweeps every sad thought and memory out of my mind. It is no dream, after all ! It is the joy of my life stealing in upon me in this same hour wherein I have touched also the bottomless pits of despair.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE END OF JOHN MARTIN, POSTMASTER AND
CHEMIST.

IT is late at night when my hansom pulls up at No. 8, Little Brook Street, but there are still lights at the upper and lower windows, so I do not hesitate to pull the bell. The door is opened at once by a gray-haired manservant in plain livery.

‘What name, sir?’ he asks, peering out into the darkness.

‘Don’t you know me, Morgan?’ I say quietly.

He gives a quick start and holds out both his hands, which I do not hesitate to grasp.

‘Mr. Norman! Thank God, sir! I’m thankful indeed to see you again. Sir Reginald has been asking for you every half-hour. Give me your portmanteau, sir.’

‘Am I to stay here, do you know, Morgan?’ I ask.

‘Your room is all ready, sir. The master had it prepared yesterday. Never mind about the cab, sir, one of the men will pay him, and send him off. Come upstairs at once, if you please, sir.’

‘How is Sir Reginald?’ I ask as we pass up the broad staircase.

‘Dying, sir!’ is the solemn reply. ‘Nothing has kept him alive through to-day but the hope of seeing you.’

‘There is no hope, then?’ I say mechanically.

‘None, sir. The doctors have left, but you will be able to see for yourself. This way, if you please.’

Morgan has thrown open the door of a large dimly-lit bedchamber, and motions me to precede him. The bed has been wheeled into the centre of the room, and the firelight shows me clearly the wan, yet still powerful face of the man whose harsh edict was the first which had driven me into my banishment. In a low chair by his side a hospital nurse is sitting before a table piled with all manner of hot-house fruit and several bottles.

She rises at our entrance, and after a brief glance at her patient, glides away into one of the darkened corners of the room.

My uncle, too, has heard us. He turns his head slowly, and his deep-set eyes, heavily fringed with long gray eyebrows, suddenly light up with unmistakable satisfaction. He motions me to draw near to the bed, and Morgan takes up his stand behind the curtains of the ante-room. To all intents and purposes we are alone.

I stand looking down into the fine but wasted face, waiting for him to speak, and bear with some dignity the keen, searching scrutiny to which I am subjected. It was almost as though he were seeking for something in my face, and as though the absence of it was a great relief; for in a minute or two he gives a little sigh, and holds out from beneath the coverlet a white, wasted hand, on which a single gold ring is hanging loosely.

‘Take my hand, Norman,’ he says in a voice stronger than I had expected from him. ‘It is late in the day to offer it, but not too late.’

‘Never too late, uncle,’ I answer quietly, holding his fingers firmly between my own.

‘We have been hard and selfish, Dick and I,’ he says slowly. ‘Poor Dick, he always wavered a little in your favour, but I would never listen. When a man is dying, Norman, many things become clear to him, many misconceptions fade away. “Judge not, that ye be not judged.” Those words have haunted me of late, Norman. You have been cruelly treated, my boy.’

‘I do not complain; I have no cause for complaint,’ I answer softly. ‘It was my own folly which has brought this living death upon me.’

‘Folly alone can never merit the sufferings which you have had to bear,’ he says. ‘We judged you unheard. Not one of us lifted up his voice to ask that question which should have been the first upon our lips. Late in the day, Norman, I have sent for you to do you justice. We should have remembered that you were one of us, and have abided by your simple word. Late in the day I have seen this thing clearly, and now, Norman, answer me as before your God, before the God who in a few hours will become my Judge: are your hands clean of blood? Had you any guilty knowledge whatever of this awful crime which men have laid to your charge?’

I raise my hands to heaven and look him in the face without fear.

‘None,’ I answer firmly. ‘I am innocent.’

‘It is enough.’

He closes his eyes for a moment, and I see that he is exhausted. I summon the nurse, and pour him out a dose of the medicine which she hands me. In a moment or two he opens his eyes again, and I see that he is not so prostrate as I had imagined him.

‘You forgive me?’ he says.

‘Fully, freely,’ I answer. ‘I have nothing to forgive. I might have judged the same had I been in your place.’

‘Call Morgan here.’

I do so. The man seems to know without any word from Sir Reginald what is wanted. He produces a roll of paper, pen and ink, and Sir Reginald,

with strength for which I had not given him credit, takes a pen into his fingers and signs his name tremulously, but with still something of the old dash. Afterwards Morgan and the nurse sign the same paper below, and it begins to dawn upon me what it means.

‘That is my will, Norman,’ he says, as soon as they have retired again. ‘I have done you tardy justice, and it will not be an empty title that will come to you. You will be rich. Money may help you to bring the truth to light.’

‘Never, I fear,’ I answer sadly. ‘Uncle, if you feel strong enough to bear it, I would like to tell you the whole miserable story. You will know then the exact amount of my folly, and the exact amount of my suffering.’

He turns his face towards me, and I see that its stern lines have all relaxed, and his eyes are filled with a kindly gleam. He simply nods, and I wait for no other encouragement. There in that darkened chamber, in such words as come to me, I tell the faithful story of my own humiliation, omitting nothing, glossing over nothing—tell it to the bitter end, even to those few moments in which Katherine Deignton and I had joined hands in my little sitting-room. And as I finish, I feel the wan, bony fingers enfolding mine, and I see tears shining in those deep bright eyes. I know then that I am no longer friendless and an outcast. Even this stern old soldier who has lived his life with a fine blamelessness which has won him a great respect from all men,

even he, knowing the very depths of my folly, has no thought for me save of sympathy and kindness. And somehow, in those few minutes of deep silence which follow the conclusion of my confession, during which we sit hand in hand, a great part of my burden seems rolled away from me. My heart is less sore, and my depression less abject. There are two people in the world who believe in me, two people who know the whole truth, and judge me more sinned against than sinning.

It is my uncle who breaks the silence at last.

‘Norman,’ he says quietly. ‘I do not believe Lady Deighton’s story to you.’

I give a quick start. The mere suggestion of its falsehood is a little bewildering to me. In my own thoughts I have scarcely dared to go so far.

‘She was not a—good woman, and she came of a wild, loose family,’ he continues in a moment. ‘I have never willingly listened to a single word spoken against a woman in my life, but when Sir Humphrey brought her home from abroad there was a good deal of talk, and some of it reached my ears—now and then. There was talk, I believe, of another lover. God knows I would never unearth—such gossip, save in such a cause,’ he continues, after a moment’s silence. ‘But have no faith in that story, Norman. Watch her. She may—have cared for you—as she says, or she may be making you the victim for the sake of some rascal of a lover in the background. Watch her, Norman. Never lose sight of her. Truth is hard to bury. Some day it may leap into

sight when you least expect it. Don't despair—don't despair, my boy.'

'I never shall,' I answer firmly. 'Katherine is remaining at Deighton Court, and if anything happens, I shall hear from her.'

'Katherine,' he repeats, with a little faint smile—"bonny Kate Deighton," as Dick used to call her. I'd like to see her, Norman. I'd like to see the woman who may some day be your wife.'

'Please God,' I answer softly. 'Uncle, I want to talk of yourself for a moment.'

'There is little left to be said of me, my boy,' he answers quietly.

'More than you imagine, I think. You are not so ill as Dr. Pleydell imagines. He doesn't know the family constitution. Remember that I am a physician.'

'And a clever one too, Norman, my boy—so they used to tell me.'

'You said something in your letter about longing for home. Should you like to go there?'

'Dearly, Norman, dearly. But they say that the journey would be my death.'

'There is a certain risk in it, but very little,' I answer. 'You have not long to live, uncle, but there is no reason why it should not be months instead of days; and there is no reason why you should not be down at Gorley Towers instead of here. Will you trust yourself to me?'

'Of course. If I could die in the old four-poster at the Towers, with my face to the sea, and you by

my side, Norman, why, it would be happiness. Is it possible, do you think?' he asks eagerly.

'I am sure of it,' I tell him. 'To-morrow we will go. I will make all the arrangements. But you must sleep to-night, and I must stay with you. I want to gauge your strength.'

'Nurse shall make you up a couch,' he says. 'Bless you, Norman! And now listen, my boy. One promise I must have from you.'

'Anything.'

'I understand that you will stay with me to the end. Is it not so?'

'Of course.'

'Yes, yes. But if there comes a letter from Katherine, if she wants you, if anything happens at Deighton, you understand, you will go at once. Promise me that, and in return I will promise you this: that I will not die in your absence. I will keep alive until you get back. I will do it.'

'Let it be so,' I answer, holding his hand for a moment. 'And now I want you to sleep. See, I am turning the lamp down. You have talked as much as is wise. I will arrange with the nurse about staying here, and to-morrow I shall take you home.'

CHAPTER XXXII.

HOPE.

IN three days we are settled at Gorley Towers, the home of our family, a fine ancient mansion built of massive and weather-beaten rocks on the iron cliffs of Northumberland. My uncle has his wish. The great north chamber has been hastily prepared for him, and the bed on which many of his ancestors have breathed their last has been drawn up to the oriel window which almost overhangs the gray troubled waters of the North Sea. On the wall before him hangs his sword, and underneath it his dearest possession in this world, the Victoria Cross.

The change back to the home of his boyhood, and the fulfilment of his desire, seems to have given him a fresh lease of life. He is palpably stronger and able to sit up in bed without difficulty ; but of his complete recovery there has never been any question. He knows as well as I that he has but a few months to live, but it does not trouble him. Death here in his old home is the death for which he had craved, and he is perfectly content.

And I spend my time mostly by his side. Once or twice, when he has fallen asleep and the nurse has been with him, I have stolen out on to the cliffs, and walked for awhile along the dreary coast, watching the white-topped waves as they dash themselves upon the storm-indented cliffs, with that same everlasting sullen roar to which I have listened many a

time in the days of my boyhood. The seagulls scream around my head, and every now and then the long solitary cry of the bittern from the inland marshes is borne upon the wind to my ears. It is a melancholy country, but it suits me very well. More cheerful surroundings would certainly be less endurable.

I am sitting with him one dull windy morning when the post-bag is brought in, and, as usual, unlocked and looked through by himself. Towards the end of the little pile he comes upon a letter which seems to interest him. He studies briefly the postmark and the handwriting. Then he hands it over to me, and watches the colour come into my cheeks as I realize whence and from whom it has come.

'It is your summons, Norman,' he says, leaning back upon the pillows, but keeping his eyes fixed upon me. 'Read it.'

I tear it open and glance rapidly through the few lines, written as I can see in great haste. When I have finished, Sir Reginald is still watching me keenly, and his thin white hand which lies upon the coverlet is shaking with anxiety.

'Aloud, Norman. Read it aloud. It is a message for you. I will hear every word.'

I do not care to deny him, so I read :

"DEIGNTON COURT,
"Thursday.

"Wherever you are, and whatever plans you have made, lay them aside the moment you receive

this letter, and come to Market Deignton. There have been so many rumours about you during the last few days that it matters little in what character you come. You may be ex-postmaster of Market Deignton or Dr. Norman Scott. It matters very little, for the end is close at hand now. If you fail me now, Norman, you will repent it all your life. Come.

“ KATHERINE.”

Sir Reginald has raised himself on his couch, and his wan face is lit up with excitement.

‘ Ring for a time-table, Norman,’ he exclaims. ‘ Go and change your clothes. Order a carriage and the fastest horses in the stable. You can stop the express at Ringford junction by signal.’

I shake my head, although it is hard to escape from the contagion of his excitement.

‘ I cannot go and leave you like this,’ I say, with an attempt at firmness. ‘ I——’

‘ Silence !’

I start with surprise at the sudden change in my uncle’s expression. His face is no longer the face of a dying man. His eyebrows are closely knit, and the old air of military command has suddenly returned. His voice, too, is abrupt and imperative.

‘ Norman, if you dare to thwart me now, you are nephew of mine no longer. What ! you think that I prize your company more than the honour of our name ? Away, sir ! Away !’

He points to the door. I have no choice but to

obey, but before I go I stretch out my hands to him.

‘Uncle, you have been very good to me,’ I say. ‘Farewell!’

‘Farewell, Norman!’ he answers with wonderful firmness. ‘And remember this: it is true that I am on the threshold of death, but on the threshold I will remain until you come back to me. Mind, I will not die. I will live until you can come and tell me that the clouds have broken, and the sun shines once more upon our name. And, Norman, bring her with you. Let me see her by your side before I die. Now, go!’

And it is thus that I leave him, with one long lingering clasp of the hand, brave and soldierly and hopeful; and as I am whirled through the country lanes to our wayside station, I realize that my desire to break through the bonds of my slavery is being fed with fresh fuel. It seems to me that the sweetest moment of my freedom would be to bring the great news to my uncle, and know that the supreme joy of my life was also a torch to light him rejoicing into another world.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LOOKING BACKWARDS.

ONCE more I am drawing near to Market Deignton, having travelled from Northumberland as swiftly as express trains and fast cabs can bring one. I have

been travelling all night, and in the still gray dawn of the winter's morning I drive over from the junction seven miles away. The east is still streaked with red, and the clear air is wonderfully soft and breathless. All the way along the deserted country lanes I have had my head out of the carriage window, drinking in the freshness of the morning, grateful after my long imprisonment in stuffy railway trains.

We rattle through the deserted little town without encountering any sign of life, save one early milk-cart, and unnoticed I let myself into my old quarters. My successor in the post-office has not yet made any proposal to me with regard to the other part of the business, or the dwelling-house, so these are still in my name. My principal connection with Market Deignton is as yet unsevered.

The sun is just beginning to gain strength, and when I pull aside the curtains it floods in upon my little room. Everything is exactly as I left it on the close of that wonderful day. It was there that I was sitting with my head bowed in my hands, and, yes, there is a faded violet still upon the tablecloth which must have fallen from the bunch she was wearing. I stand there for awhile, completely lost in recollections of those few sweet hours—the oasis which, be my future life ever so dark and dreary, will still remain an entrancing memory in the sandy desert of my despair. Utter misery I can never realize or taste again. There must always be one faint sweet light shining through the gloom.

I go upstairs and change my travelling clothes

and take a bath. Afterwards, with the help of an oil-stove, I make some coffee, and while I drink it I read over for the twentieth time the letter which has brought me here.

It may mean so much, or so little. And it is so with my life. That also may mean so much, or so little. As I fold the letter up and replace it in my pocket, I realize more completely than ever that the absolute despair of a few weeks ago can never come to me again. Even now I cannot sit in this little room save with quickened pulses and stirred heart. She loves me. It is just that knowledge which makes life endurable, even though we had parted without any certainty of ever looking into one another's face again.

For we have never for one moment deceived ourselves as to what our course for the future may be. I have dimly planned schemes for rushing through life as fast as the seeds can be shaken through the cylinder, by travel in Africa with a friend of my college days, whose letters of invitation, after long wanderings, have just reached me, or by any other honest and faithful means. In any case I have never had the faintest idea of offering my shattered life to Katherine. There is a barrier between us which is hopeless. Sir Humphrey was her father, and until my dying day that awful accusation of Lady Deighton's will brand me as an unwitting accessory to his death. Innocent in purpose, innocent in deed, and yet morally guilty in the broad light of that woman's confessed motives—that is my position. She knows

it, and yet she wants to see me again. Why? Has she still any lingering doubts, I wonder, as to the hopelessness of my position? I dare not trust myself to share them, and yet I am thankful for her message. Once more I shall see her come down the winding brown path amongst the pine-trees, slim, and proud, and fair, in her sober black gown and jacket, on her way to the little church. It will be another memory to crystallize and cherish, another bright spot in a boundless desolation. Shall I stand amongst the shadows of the dark-growing trees and watch her lift her eyes from the ground as at last she sees me; and will the glad light rush into them, I wonder, and flash across her face, as I watched it once before? It is thus that I hope to meet her. Thus may it be.

And soon I am on my way to meet her, starting early to avoid much notice from the townspeople, who would surely be surprised to see me so soon back amongst them. The fresh, buoyant air, sharp though it is with more than a touch of frost, is pleasant to me after my long hours of travel and scanty rest, and I bare my head to the breeze which sweeps across the open country and through the bare hedge-tops. Soon the little clustering market-town, with its thin spirals of gray smoke curling upwards, and its many suggestions of Sunday repose, lies at my feet, a miniature panorama. I come on the uplands which lead to Deignton Court, and on my left is the dark range of hills, growing more and more distinct, which has grown so familiar to me during the days of my exile.

Even now I find it hard to look upon them without a sudden sinking of spirit ; for in those weary hours when I have gazed out from my little lattice window as from behind the bars of a prison they have somehow figured in my thoughts as the types of my inward sadness. Dark, majestic in their broken rugged line, unchangeably and mysteriously solemn, they have seemed to me to bear some vague but depressing analogy to my own sufferings.

But to-day all things are changed. This brief period of my absence, big with great events, has assumed a curious importance in my mind. It seems to me almost like a leaf out of a far distant past—my life in this little old-world town brought to so sudden a termination by these great shocks of fortune. It is hard to believe that in actual measure of time only a few suns have risen from behind those everlasting hills since I hurried along this road from Deighton Court, with the iron of a cold despair planted in my heart. To-day I retrace those steps, taken in desperate haste and bitter disappointment, and to what end I cannot tell. But I shall soon know.

I am in the pine-wood long before the church-bell commences to peal, long before the hour of her coming. But time means little to me. I wander about, in a certain sense impatient, and yet with a certain dread of her coming hard to account for ; and in the end I am surprised when I hear a light step on the path, and, looking up, find her almost at my side.

I do not attempt to frame any ordinary speech or

greeting ; I do not, indeed, say anything at all. I stand there with my hands outstretched watching her. I want to read her face, and I bend my whole attention to its changes. The surprise which first flashes into it is banished by a curious shyness, a sudden drooping of the eyes and access of colour ; and then a frank, womanly greeting, and a kindly, pleasant, upward glance. I am satisfied. It is what I hoped for.

‘It is really you, then !’ she laughs, with her hands still resting in mine. ‘You had my letter ?’

‘Yes. Am I not here ?’ And, lest she should have any doubt at all about it, I hold her hands a little tighter.

‘When did you get it ? I did not expect to see you until to-morrow at the earliest. Northumberland seems so far off.’

‘I got it yesterday morning, and started about half an hour afterwards.’

‘And you reached here, when ?’

‘I was landed at the junction at about five o’clock this morning, and got a chaise from there to take me to Market Deighton ; stole into my old rooms like a thief in the dark, changed my things and washed—and here I am !’

‘You must be tired to death,’ she says reproachfully. ‘You ought to have gone to bed.’

‘Tired ? Not a whit !’ I answer lightly. ‘If I was, it has gone.’

She laughs, and draws her hands away from mine. I let them go reluctantly.

‘I must give up church, I suppose,’ she says thoughtfully. ‘I have a good deal to say to you.’

An old desire comes back to me at that moment—a desire felt first when I had looked through the old church window and seen her sitting alone in her pew, with the sunlight playing upon the dark oak and glancing across her devout upturned face. For a moment I hesitate, then I tell her of it.

‘Katherine, since that day I have never been in a church. There will be no one there yet. I wonder—could we not go in for a few minutes?’

‘I should like it,’ she answers softly but readily. ‘Let us hurry and get there before the service. I am glad that I came so early.’

And so, saying little to each other, we pass through the little swing-gate into the meadow and across it into the churchyard. The old nail-studded door is unfastened, and we push it noiselessly open. I would have taken the nearest seat, but she leads me up the stone aisle into her own square pew.

‘I shall be back in one moment,’ she whispers, taking up a basket of flowers from the seat. ‘I must just arrange these.’

I bow my head, and watch her as she passes through the little wooden rail up to the communion table, with her hands full of the rare white blossoms, whose perfume seems to fill the tiny building. The sun is shining faintly through the rich stained-glass windows, touching her face as she kneels for a moment at her task, and casting a long ray of light across the dark, worm-eaten oak stalls. As she rises

to her feet and comes back towards me, it catches her face and bathes it in a momentary sweetness. Her lips relax a little into a smile, and her eyes meet mine. Almost unconsciously I sink on to my knees upon the coarse straw hassock. In a moment she too is at my side, her face hidden in her white hands. Then I know that my coming has not been in vain.

I too bow my head, and dream that I am back again in the days of a simpler and sweeter clear-mindedness, before the fogs of science and a keenly-developed intellect had clouded my understanding. My mind is suddenly purged of its load of earthly troubles, and a peace which I have not known since the days of my boyhood steals in upon me. In those few moments all the bitterness and heart-soreness of my struggle with the world seem to fall away from me, leaving only a sense of unutterable relief and deep restfulness. For the first time for many years I find myself thinking of the days of my boyhood, of my mother's face—a dim yet sweet memory—and of the time when I stood on the threshold of manhood, alike fearless and defiant of its evil, nursing in my heart lofty ideals and strong yet wholesome ambitions. The noxious pessimism which, however unconsciously, has tainted my later days falls away from me. I rise from my knees and step out again into the clear sunlight—a better and a saner man.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

‘YOU WILL HAVE NO MERCY NOW?’

WE leave the church just as the first bell commences to peal, and I follow Katherine in silence along a path which crosses the meadow diagonally, and leads into a deeper portion of the woods. For some time not a word passes between us. I am experiencing the luxury of a deep mental calm, grateful beyond all manner of expression after the troubled days through which I have passed. It is a calm, too, more of hopefulness than dejection. A light has been let in upon my spirits, although I cannot tell from whence. With every step I take in the clear winter air, I feel my hopes growing stronger. What Katherine has to say to me I cannot tell. I only judge from her serious face and knitted brows that it is of some import.

At last she tells me, although, strange to say, I have felt no impatience. We have come to an open space where some timber has been felled, and we seat ourselves for awhile upon one of the giant trunks which lies, lopped of its branches, alongside the path. Then she turns towards me and speaks.

‘Am I very bold to have sent for you like this, Norman?’ she asks.

‘If it be bold to give life to the dying,’ I answer promptly. ‘Not unless.’

‘You remember how we parted,’ she continues, speaking in a low tone, and with her eyes fixed upon

the ground. 'You would hold out no hope whatever. So far as you were concerned, our partnership was at an end. You looked upon the present position with absolute despair. What the position was, for some reason of your own, you refused to tell. You chose to break the bond of confidence there was between us. You simply withdrew from it without explanation.'

'Katherine——'

She interrupts me quickly.

'I am not blaming you. I do not see what else you could have done. Only being a woman, and a very much interested woman, I was naturally not content to remain in a state of ignorance. For reasons which I gave you the credit of believing sufficient ones from your point of view, you declined to tell me even the nature of the obstruction which had come in our path. Very well. The natural sequence was that I determined to find out for myself. Do you see?'

I move a little uneasily, and commence to break into small pieces a twig which I have been holding in my hands. But I do not interrupt her. What would be the use?

'I do not think that I should ever have succeeded, not altogether, at any rate; but, as it happens, Lady Deignton has told me herself.'

'Told you herself!' I repeat in blank amazement.

'Unwittingly—yes. Listen,' she continues, dropping her voice and bending towards me. 'You remember

how I found out about Mason and his night visit to my stepmother?’

‘Yes.’

‘Since then I have often chosen to sit in the inner drawing-room, whenever, in fact, my stepmother has chosen to sit in the outer. On Wednesday night I was rewarded. Lady Deighton had been sitting there all the evening, and at ten o’clock she rang the bell and asked where I was. The man went to my maid, who told him, as I had directed, that I had gone to my room. He brought back word to my stepmother, and she then told him that the servants were to go to bed. There was no gas lit in the room where I was, and she could not have had the least suspicion that I was there; yet, out of precaution I suppose, she drew the curtains which hang between the two rooms, and fastened them with a cord. There was still, however, plenty of space left for me to look through.

‘For more than an hour she walked up and down the room, talking softly sometimes to herself, and at others standing quite still as though she were listening. Then, about eleven o’clock, I heard a faint tapping at the high French window. Directly she began to undo the fastenings I looked through the gap in the curtains, and I saw Mason step softly into the room. They commenced talking at once in low whispers, and for a long time I could hear nothing. Then Mason moved a little nearer to me, and I heard him say:

“‘Oh, thank God for that! You are sure that he is gone?’”

“Quite sure,” he whispered back. “He will never come here again. I—I told him——”

“What did you tell him?” he interrupted hoarsely.
“What was it?”

“I told him that I killed Sir Humphrey for love of him, and—and he believed me.”

‘Then they moved away from me and I heard no more.’

There is a few moments’ intense silence. Trees and sky seem reeling round. I am scarcely sure of myself. Then I clutch hold of her wrist and grasp it fiercely.

‘You—heard—her, Lady Deignton, say that!’ I cry, with a passion which vibrates through my smothered tones. ‘Quick! Tell me again.’

‘I heard her say those very words,’ she answers, looking me in the face. ‘Then for the first time I understood your absence, and knew how great must be your sufferings. So, you see, I did not delay. Early on Thursday morning I drove over to the junction and sent that letter to you.’

It is several moments before I can say anything. It is hard for me to realize the whole import of what I have heard; hard for me to realize that once more, without dishonour and without shame, I can fling myself, body and soul, into the struggle for freedom.

Then, perhaps for the first time, as they fall away from me, I realize too the hideous burning pressure of those iron bands which Lady Deignton’s false words have forged around me. But it is over. Once more I have stepped back into the light, nay, rather

the twilight, but how much sweeter than the abysmal gloom in which I have been sitting! If I am not yet a free man, the doors of my prison are open, and the path lies clear before me. With a sudden gesture of exaltation, I spring to my feet and lift my hands towards the sky.

'Free!' I cry. 'Free to work out my own redemption!'

'And my desire,' Katherine murmurs fervently. 'Norman, turn your face towards me, and listen. I have a thing to ask you.'

I take her hands in mine, and look into her eyes.

'Well?'

'Now that you know that this woman won your forbearance with a lie—and such a lie!—you will not hesitate to track her down. You have been grossly deceived once. You will have no mercy now?'

'None,' I answer. 'There is no vengeance in my quest. It is justice which I seek. I want the truth, and I will have it! Lady Deighton, or any other, I care not.'

'It is well,' she answers softly. 'Norman!'

'Yes.'

'I must ask you one more question—a horrible one.'

'I do not fear it.'

'Lady Deighton spoke of a bond between you and her and——'

'That will do,' I interrupt. 'There was nothing. In those days, when she singled me out from all her admirers, I was mad enough to believe that I loved

her, and mad enough to be very unhappy about it. But to the last, even to that night when I fled away from Deighton Court in fear of myself, I was able to look Sir Humphrey in the face. I had been madly foolish, and I was wretchedly ashamed of it. That was all.'

'You must not think that I have turned inquisitor; but there is one thing more I want to ask,' she says, after a moment's pause. 'It is something concerned with the night of the "event," and something which you have never spoken to me about.'

I have an idea what she means, but I sign to her to proceed.

'You left Deighton Court suddenly, and in the middle of the night. Your excuse about a telegram was not the real reason. That unexplained and abrupt departure is chief amongst the evidence against you. It seems to me that the time has come when I may ask you why you went?'

I drop her hands, and look away into the dark part of the wood. But I do not delay my answer.

'I left because I found in my room a note from Lady Deighton. She proposed—but read it for yourself; it has been in my pocket-book ever since.'

She holds out her hands and shrinks back. 'No, I will not see it—I will not touch it! You must tell me.'

'It was only a line. It told me to leave the door of my room unlocked. That was all. I found it in a blank envelope, on my dressing-case, during the evening. I walked downstairs and out of the house.'

There is a short silence. Then she turns round and speaks to me in altogether a changed manner and altered tone. I can see that she wishes, for the present, to ignore this part of our conversation, and I am thankful for it.

‘Tell me how things have gone with you since you left Market Deignton,’ she says. ‘You have been in Northumberland, you say.’

I tell her everything in a few words ; but when I have finished her eyes are full of tears.

‘I remember your uncle, Sir Reginald, quite well,’ she says. ‘I used to think him the handsomest old gentleman I had ever seen, and the nicest. And he made you come directly you had my letter!’

‘Directly. He would not hear of an instant’s delay. He was as impatient as I was.’

‘And how long will it be safe for you to stay away from him?’

‘Not more than a week, I am afraid. If nothing turns up by then, I must go back.’

‘One week. We may do much in a week,’ Katherine remarks thoughtfully. ‘By-the-by, Norman, where are you going to stay—in Market Deignton?’

‘I suppose so. You know that there is another postmaster appointed.’

‘I have not heard it, but I am not surprised. No more afternoon teas in the shop-parlour, or suppressed telegrams.’

Her words remind me of the last one I sent for Lady Deignton, and I ask her a question.

‘Did Stephen Callender ever leave the White House?’ I ask.

‘I believe not,’ she answers. ‘This is what I want to talk to you about. I believe that he is there still.’

‘Why?’

‘Because Lady Deighton goes down there every day. To all appearance, the house is empty and locked up, but every day at dusk Lady Deighton has been there, and Mason admits her.’

‘Mason!’

‘Yes, Mason. Norman, that innocent-looking house holds your fate and mine. It must yield us up its secret.’

‘It shall,’ I answer, springing up. ‘Come, Katherine, why do we hesitate any longer? Let us go there now in the broad daylight, force our way in, and insist upon seeing this man, whoever he may be. I am longing for action, and there is no reason for delay. Come.’

Her hand upon my arm restrains me. ‘Wait. I have something else to tell you.’

‘What is it?’

‘Do you remember a cry in the street whilst you and I were in your little back room that afternoon?’

‘Remember it, yes!’ I exclaim with sudden interest.

‘You rushed outside, but there was no one in sight, only the back of Lady Deighton’s carriage turning the church corner.’

‘Yes.’

'Well, the girl who shrieked was Olive Walsingham, and she was in that carriage.'

'With Lady Deignton?'

'Yes, with Lady Deignton.'

'Ah!'

'She was coming into the post-office, and met Lady Deignton face to face upon the pavement. She recognised her, and the result of her recognition was the shriek we heard. Lady Deignton hurried her into the carriage and brought her to the Court. Now you can see why my stepmother positively refused to see her when she came first to Deignton Court on that Sunday afternoon. They are not strangers.'

'And her brother. Why, she came to me on the following day and told me that he was found; that I was to let Stephen Callender and the White House alone. Her brother was abroad, and she was going to him,' she said.

'The words were put into her mouth by Lady Deignton. She lied.'

'What has that girl's brother, a mere gentleman's valet, to do with Lady Deignton?'

'One thing more,' she continues. 'I have seen a copy of my father's will. Stephen Callender received a legacy of five thousand pounds.'

I look at her in bewilderment. 'What does it all mean?' I cry. 'Who is this Stephen Callender?'

'In a few days we shall know. Perhaps to-night. Perhaps—— What was that?'

She has stopped short in her speech, and sprung to

her feet. I, too, turn hastily in the direction whence the sound has come. It was only a slight one, the quick snapping of a twig and the rustling of dead leaves, as though a light footstep had passed over them. But there is no one in sight, and though we listen intently, there is no further sound.

I stride through the undergrowth a few yards further into the wood. There is no one to be seen. I try another direction, with the same result. There is no sign of anyone having been near, nor is there any further sound.

‘It must have been a rabbit, or a fox perhaps,’ I say, turning back to Katherine. ‘There is no one here.’

‘There is a path a few yards further on,’ she answers. ‘Quick! get through to it. Just beyond those brambles.’

I push my way through the tangled bushes, and come out in a broad green path. Still there is no one in sight.

In a minute Katherine, flushed and breathless, joins me.

‘Was there no sign of anyone?’ she asks.

‘Not a vestige,’ I answer. ‘It must have been an animal of some sort.’

She appears curiously disturbed. ‘Listen,’ she whispers.

We stand perfectly still. There is nothing to be heard, save the usual wood noises; and being winter and a curiously still day, even they are very slight and low. Gradually the colour comes back to her cheeks.

‘I don’t know why I am so nervous,’ she declares, with a little laugh ; ‘but just a moment before I had an idea that someone was near listening to us. I stopped suddenly while I was talking, you know.’

‘Yes. It was fancy, dear. One often hears such sounds in a wood.’

‘I suppose so,’ she admits. ‘Still, it is odd that I should feel like that.’

An unmistakable sound comes to us now through the silent air. It is the stable clock at the Court chiming the hour. Katherine listens to it amazed.

‘One o’clock. I had no idea that it was so late. I must go back to the Court for a little time, or Lady Deighton will miss me. Could you wait for about an hour and a half?’

‘I’ll try,’ I answer cheerfully.

‘I shall not be more than two hours, and then we shall have so long together that you will very likely get tired of me,’ she says, laughing. ‘Lady Deighton will think that I am at the vicarage.’

‘And what are we going to do?’ I ask eagerly.

‘We are going to wait here and watch,’ she answers in a low tone. ‘You see that green path behind the trees. If Lady Deighton goes to the White House this evening, she will pass along it.’

‘And if she does?’

‘If she does, we will follow her.’

CHAPTER XXXV

WHOSE WAS THE FACE?

I WATCH her cross the meadow and turn in at the little gate which leads through the Court shrubberies. Here she waves me a final farewell, and disappears. After a few moments' indecision, I light a cigar and set out for a brisk walk through the woods.

For a time it is pleasant enough. I climb a little hill and gain a fine view of the Court, with its picturesque outline and stacks of ancient chimneys clearly defined against the background of dark-green hills. The country, bare and brown in its winter's garb, is at its best in the faint soft sunlight. A blue haze hangs about the horizon, and though the deep colouring of autumn has almost faded, yet here and there the sunlight brings out a purple tone in the distant woods which surround the Court. I walk a little further still, and then I come to a sudden standstill. I am feeling exceedingly uncomfortable, and I have just divined the reason. It is many hours since I tasted food, and I am ravenously hungry.

I turn the matter over in my mind. There is just a possibility of Katherine's bringing me some sandwiches; on the other hand, there is a possibility that she may either forget it or have no opportunity of procuring them. I should certainly be better off if I could manage, at any rate, to take the edge off my appetite, which is a thing rapidly growing beyond

sandwiches. I mount a gate and look around me for means to do so.

On the south side of the field into which I am looking are some fowls and guinea-hens, and from inside the wood, a few yards further back, a thin column of smoke is rising amongst the trees. It is evidently the nearest habitation, and I follow the gray stone wall which divides wood from meadow land until I come to the south corner. Here a small gate leads into a trim garden ; built right up against the thickly-growing trees is a gray stone cottage, with the Deighton coat of arms engraved over the door.

My appearance is the signal for a general commotion. A dozen dogs tug at their chains, and howl in every conceivable key as I touch the latch, and one or two more welcome me with wriggling bodies and wagging tails. A litter of pups come tumbling over one another, and jumping around my legs with great manifestations of delight ; and a small boy on all fours behind a board upon the cottage floor sets up a vigorous chorus to the general uproar. In the midst of it all, a tall, broad-shouldered man in a brown velveteen coat stalks out from one of the outhouses. I recognise him at once.

Instantly the turmoil is at an end. The dogs retire one by one into their kennels, from the depths of which they sit and glare at me. The pups desert my legs for the new-comer, and the baby ceases to yell. The man stands in the middle of the path looking at me, with a heavy frown on his honest weather-beaten face.

‘What do you want here, sir?’ he inquires slowly.

‘Something to eat, John Rudd,’ I answer cheerfully. ‘I am hungry.’

‘Have you walked from Market Deignton, sir?’

‘Since breakfast,’ I answer. ‘I am a starving man.’

He invites me to walk in, civilly, but without heartiness. I decline to have anything to say to the best room, and take a seat in a fine oak chair before a huge fireplace in the kitchen.

‘We’ve very little to give you, sir,’ he remarks. ‘Me and the missus had dinner at half-past eleven, and she’s gone over to her brother’s now, or she would cook you something. Would home-brewed ale and bread and cheese—it’s a Stilton——’

‘Nothing in the world could be better, John.’

He spreads a clean white cloth upon the table, clumsily, but neatly, and brings out a loaf of bread and the better half of a Stilton cheese from the larder. Then I hear his heavy footsteps underneath in the cellar, from which he presently reappears with a Dutch blue jug of ample proportions, so full that he has to set it down carefully. As soon as he has completed the preparations for my repast, he leaves me without a word—save one of civil invitation to draw my chair up to the table—and I hear him outside feeding the dogs.

In twenty minutes I am feeling a different man. I light a cigar, and go out and tell him so.

‘I’m glad to hear it, sir,’ he answers, scarcely

glancing up from his occupation. 'Good-morning, sir.'

'Just a moment, John. I'm a doctor, you know. What's the matter with you?'

He looks up quickly. The bronzed face has lost a good deal of flesh and colour, and he stoops when he walks.

'I am quite well, thank you, sir,' he answers. 'There is nothing at all the matter with me.'

'Yes, there is, John. Night-watching doesn't seem to be agreeing with you.'

He stalks to the gate, opens it, and points up the field.

'I wish you good-morning, sir. And, Mr. Norman.'

'Yes, John.'

'I've knowed you a good many years, sir, and Sir Reginald before you. Sir Reginald was the best master I ever had, and for his sake as well as your own, I'd be sorry for any harm to come to you. I've just a private word for your ear, sir. It's a word of advice. Will you take it?'

'I will if I can, John.'

'Then just walk up this field, and set your face towards Market Deignton, and catch the first train to London, or wherever you be living. This is no place for you, sir. I tell 'ee you're not safe here, sir,' he wound up energetically. 'You're not safe, and I wish you'd go.'

'And why am I not safe? Who is there to harm me? What have I done that I should be in any danger from anyone? Tell me that, John.'

'It's more than I can do, sir ; but mind my words, they're the solid truth.'

'They may be ; and yet, what have I to fear? I am an honest man. I have done no one any harm.'

'That's as it may be, sir.'

I bend over and look him in the face.

'John Rudd, do you believe that I murdered Sir Humphrey Deignton ?'

'There's a many who do believe it, sir,' he answers.

'Look me squarely in the face, John. Do you believe it ?'

'I know nothing about it, sir,' he answers doggedly. 'I only know that there's them as says you did, and plenty of them.'

'I know it, John. But you're not one of them. I can see in your face that you're not.'

'It's of no consequence what I believe, sir.'

'It is of a good deal of consequence to me,' I answer gravely. 'You could help me, if you would.'

He does not answer. He has turned away, and is calmly examining one of the pups.

'John, who lives at the White House?' I ask him abruptly.

'Mr. Stephen Callender, sir.'

'And who is Mr. Stephen Callender? Why do you guard his house by night? Is he in hiding? Who is he, and what has he done? Come, John, I have a good right to ask these questions.'

He does not answer, or, indeed, make any sign of having heard me at all. He vanishes into the

cottage, and returns immediately carrying a double-barrelled gun full cocked.

‘Mr. Norman, I was bred on your uncle’s land, and I’ve known you since you was no higher than my knee, but I’ve got to tell ’ee this: If you hang about here and play the spy, or ask me any questions which it is not my business or my duty to answer, I’ve got to treat you like I should a poacher, or any trespasser that wouldn’t move off when he was warned. Now, sir, will you go!’

I toss him half a sovereign, and shrug my shoulders.

‘Here, John, put this in the children’s money-box,’ I say. ‘You’re an honest fellow, but I can’t exactly call you a grateful one. Good-morning.’

I turn away, and he walks slowly to the garden wall after me. When I reach the gate leading back into the wood I glance around. He is still standing there with his gun on his shoulder, watching me with curious intentness. He has not stooped to pick up the half-sovereign. Every step I have taken the barrel of his gun has covered me. The thought of it is scarcely pleasant. One little tremor of the finger and I should have been a dead man. When I remember the man’s wild look and strange manner, I am conscious of a distinct feeling of relief.

I make my way back to the little clearing in the woods where I am to meet Katherine, and sit down on the fallen tree lazily smoking my cigar. For awhile my thoughts keep my brain active, but as the time steals on I begin to be conscious of a drowsy languor stealing slowly over me. I have had no

sleep for two nights, and the air has been strong. Finally, I rest my head upon my hand and close my eyes. For some time, I cannot tell how long, I doze.

Quite suddenly I wake and start to my feet. There is no one in sight, no sound. Yet the feeling with which I awoke was unmistakable. I felt that I was not alone. Somewhere amongst that thick undergrowth, or behind those dark trees, someone was looking—someone whose presence boded ill to me.

I stand up in the centre of the little space and look around.

‘Who is there?’ I cry. ‘Come into the light and let me see you!’

I am no coward, and yet here in the clear sunlight I find myself shivering. There is no answer to my challenge, no sound to be heard, although I am holding my breath and standing perfectly still, with all my senses keenly tense and on the alert. I begin to reason with myself. I must have been dreaming, I must——

‘Ah!’

My eyes suddenly detect a black object moving amongst the trees. There is a slight but distinct sound. This time at least it is no question of fox or rabbit, or any other animal. It is the rustle of a woman’s gown amongst the dead leaves.

I spring forward, but suddenly stop short and throw up my arms. There is a blinding flash of light before my eyes, more brilliant than the sun’s pale rays, followed by a loud report and a hot

stinging pain in my shoulder. The trees are dancing before my eyes round and round and round. How damp these leaves are. I am on the ground, sinking down, down, down. And what is this upon my cheek?—a burning spot, a woman's hot tearful kiss; and words—tremulous faint words—mingled with that far-off ringing which seems to be beating upon the drums of my ears and stealing through my brain:

‘Oh, forgive, forgive!’

I strive to keep my eyes open, but I can see nothing distinctly. Just a suggestion of a woman's dark swimming eyes, a patch of blue sky, and an acorn which swings from an oak bough above my head. And now a mist is blotting them all out, and the throbbing upon the drums of my ears is louder. And earth and sky and trees are dancing madly away into black darkness.

I remember no more. I become unconscious.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

IS THERE DEATH IN THE CUP?

IT is very odd. Last night—was it not last night?—I was in my old room, the bachelor chamber at Gorley Towers, with the roar of the sea lulling me to sleep, and surrounded by all the familiar objects of my boyhood. This morning everything has vanished away as though it were a dream, I am in a strange

bedroom—a room of which I have not the faintest recollection, which I am quite sure that I have never been in before. The walls are merely white-washed, and hung with little texts in frames. The windows have funny little diamond panes, and there is a sill wide enough for two people to sit in. I don't see my bag or my dressing-case, or any of my things, and—yes, I am most certainly wearing another man's night-clothes, and pretty coarse ones they are, although clean, I am thankful to say. By my side, too, is a table with bottles on it and a wine-glass, just as though I had been ill. It can't be a dream, for I am most certainly wide awake. I will get up and see what it means, and who——

‘Ah!’

What is the matter? Have I sprained my shoulder? I can't move it. The pain, when I tried to lean on it to spring out of bed just now, was awful. Why, it is bandaged, swathed in heavy, clumsy bandages, and—good God! Blood!

I have common-sense enough to lie back upon the pillow and think. Slowly it all comes back to me. The letter from Katherine, my departure from Gorley Towers, and the long journey here; the meeting with Katherine in the wood, and then—yes, that was it, I was in the wood sitting on the trunk of a tree; there was a shot. Yes, that was it. I was waiting for Katherine; I remember quite well now. But where am I, and in whose hands?

I try to get up again, and find out once more how weak I am. I give up the attempt for awhile.

Physical movement being impossible, I lie quite still and endeavour to grasp the situation mentally.

Where am I, and in whose hands? That is the most important question for me to decide at present. I should probably, when found in the wood, have been carried to the nearest house, and I have this to consider—that the part of the wood in which I was shot being private and quite unfrequented, I was probably removed at the instigation of the person who shot me. If that be so, it is fair to presume that I am not in friendly hands. And yet, to judge by my surroundings, there seems to have been some clumsy attempts at taking care of me. That the person who tried to shoot me should be now trying to restore me to health seems a little illogical, and a little feminine.

What is that? The barking of dogs—a good many dogs. Whose voice is that reproving them? It is quite familiar to me, and surely I have heard it lately. Ah, I know! I know, too, where I am. The voice was John Rudd's, and I am in John Rudd's cottage.

I have gained my first point. I know where I am. I know, too, that I am in the hands of one who would not willingly see me come to harm, yet who, if he chose, could tell me the secret of my attempted murder. He knew that I was in danger when he warned me. Then he must also know from whom.

Lady Deighton is his mistress. Lady Deighton is the only woman, so far as I know, to whom my absence from this world would be distinctly a thing

to be desired. And yet, can it be she? Can it be the woman whose hand has lain in mine, and whose voice and eyes have spoken—— But that will do. It is a train of thought which I dare not follow just now.

I try to force my memory back to the moment when I sat on the trunk of that tree waiting for Katherine. Let me see: I remember hearing the stealthy rustling of light footsteps, and a woman's skirts trailing amongst the dead leaves. I remember turning round and seeing—what was it that I saw? The blaze of light seemed to have hidden so much; the white puff of smoke, the pain, the trees and sky flying round and round. Yet there is another memory behind it all, if only I could seize upon it. My brain seems so unsteady, and I find it hard to concentrate my thoughts upon that moment. There was a black gown behind the trees, and a face. Oh! it is no use, no use. The face seems to mock me. My memory has suddenly become a blank.

My temples are hot, and I feel my pulse. It has risen rapidly during the last few moments. I must put away these thoughts for awhile. When I am stronger I will force myself to recall that little scene again.

I lie still and idly gaze out of the window; soon I fall asleep. When I awake I feel stronger, and my pulse is more regular. I take advantage of this to sit up in bed and make a brief examination of my wound. I discover that the bandages are ill fitting, and that it has been badly dressed, but, fortunately,

the wound itself is trifling. A few inches to the right would have ended my life. As it is, the bullet has grazed my shoulder-blade and simply torn up the skin. It will probably be healed in a day or two.

A sound upon the stairs. Someone is coming up; doubtless my nurse. I sit up eagerly. At last I shall have some news of the outside world. The latch is lifted and a small ruddy-faced, black-haired woman enters, bearing a basin of beef-tea. This must be John Rudd's wife.

She sets down the beef-tea, and approaches the bedside. Seeing me with my eyes open and watching her, she stops suddenly.

'Oh! you are better, sir,' she exclaims. 'That's well.'

'Thanks,' I answer, with my eyes fixed upon the basin. 'Is that beef-tea?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Will you give it to me, please?'

She brings it to the bedside, and proposes to hold it for me. I show her, however, that I am quite able to do that for myself; and, to her further surprise, I finish the basinful before I speak again.

'Were you hungry?' she asks, taking the empty basin from my hands, and looking at me curiously.

'Ravenously,' I answer. 'Now tell me, please, how long have I been here?'

She shakes her head and looks troubled.

'You must not ask me any questions at all, please, sir. My orders are not to talk to you.'

‘At any rate you can tell me that,’ I protest.
‘Was it yesterday that I was brought here?’

‘No, the day before,’ she answers hesitatingly.
‘Now, please don’t ask me anything else, sir. I shall only get into trouble, and if you only knew how I’ve disobeyed orders already! Hush!’

There is a low tapping at the door downstairs. The woman looks at me for a moment with wide-open, terrified eyes. Her ruddy cheeks have suddenly become almost pallid. She seems to be completely paralyzed with fear.

The tapping is repeated a little more imperiously. By this time Mrs. Rudd seems to have made up her mind how to act. She seizes the tray and empty basin from the bed, and opening the window, drops them softly down on to the ground beneath. Then she closes it noiselessly and comes over to my side.

‘You are not to let anyone know that you have had this beef-tea,’ she says, bending close over me with a strangely frightened look in her eyes. ‘Pretend to be unconscious. It is for your own good. Be silent.’

Before I can find breath to ask her any questions, she has gone. I hear her open the cottage door, and there is a few minutes’ conversation in the room below. Then I hear the sound of soft footsteps and the rustling of skirts—silken skirts—upon the wooden stairs; the latch of the door is lifted, and a woman in dark clothes and closely veiled sweeps into the room. I am watching through half-closed eyes, and I recognise her. It is Lady Deignton.

She comes across the floor to my bedside, moving with that easy, undulating grace which, in the old days, I had been wont to think the very perfection of a woman's walk, filling the air with a faint familiar perfume, and, by contrast, intensifying the bareness and meanness of the low-raftered, plainly furnished little room. She comes to the very edge of the bed and looks down. My eyes are quite closed now, but I can hear her soft breathing, and presently her fingers take my bare wrist. She pushes back the cuff of my night-gown and holds my pulse. I can feel it quicken a little, and I know that it will not be wise to feign absolute unconsciousness too long. Already she seems to be a little suspicious, for she lowers her head, and I feel her warm breath upon my cheeks. Then I open my eyes and look up at her in a dazed manner.

She does not shrink away as I had half expected her to do, but meets my eyes fully and searchingly. It is as though she is seeking to read my whole condition, mental and physical, to measure my strength against hers, and to know my thoughts. I do my best to mask both. Then, without withdrawing her gaze, she speaks to me :

‘You are better, Norman.’

There is no sympathy in her tone—more of mockery. I endeavour to compress my brows into a frown, and I take care that my voice is low and faint.

‘Thanks to a woman's failing wrist and ill aim,

yes,' I answer. 'Is it you whom I have to thank for this, Lady Deignton?'

She looks at me, still with the same fixed gaze, but with a certain amount of genuine surprise in her face.

'Is it possible—that you do not know?'

'I know—that it was a woman. I believe that it was you.'

'Why?'

'Who else holds me her enemy?'

'Enemy! And why should you and I be enemies?'

'Your heart must answer that question, Lady Deignton—your heart and your guilt.'

'My guilt? Ah, yes. Thank you for reminding me of it. As you say—my guilt.'

She walks to the window, and stands there with her back to me, and her firm, delicate figure clearly outlined against the light. Only her face is turned away, and I cannot see it.

'When you can spare me the time, I shall be glad to ask you a few questions, Lady Deignton,' I say.

She turns round slowly and faces me.

'You may ask. I may not choose to answer.'

'Where am I?'

She shakes her head. 'Go on.'

'Why am I here?'

'It was the most convenient place to bring you—out of the way.'

'When am I going to be allowed to depart?'

'When your hurt is healed. It is not very serious. You can see that for yourself.'

'But I am weak, terribly weak. I want strengthening medicine, and wine, and food, or I shall be here for weeks.'

A faint smile crosses her lips.

'You will have everything necessary—in moderation.'

'Why don't they bring me something now, then? I am fainting for want of it.'

'They have my orders.'

I half raise myself, taking care that the effort shall seem to cost me more pain than it really does, and look at her sternly.

'You wish to keep me here, hanging on between life and death. You are going to half starve me, like a dog. Is that your little plan?'

She shrugs her shoulders.

'You are just as well here out of the way for a short time,' she says. 'Meddlesome people generally get into trouble, and it will teach you a lesson.'

'I understand,' I tell her, sinking back amongst the bedclothes, but keeping my eyes fixed upon her. 'You wish—to keep me here till—till—you and your—accomplice can escape. Oh, it is an excellent scheme.'

'My accomplice? You are talking in riddles. I do not understand you. You are raving.'

'Yes, your accomplice, Mr. Stephen Callender,' I say boldly.

A sudden spasm distorts her face. It is only for a moment—come and gone so swiftly that, had I not been watching her with more than ordinary intent-

ness, I could scarcely have noticed it. Then she nods her head, gently, sympathetically, mockingly.

‘Poor fellow! I thought the fever had quite left you. We shall have to be careful how much nourishment you take. You will not be well quite so soon as I thought you would.’

Her last words have a meaning of their own, and a sinister one. I am well aware of it, but I make no sign. I sink back as though completely exhausted, and turn my back upon her.

I think I must have fallen into a short doze, for when I open my eyes again the daylight is fast fading away and the room is in semi-darkness. In the corner furthest from the bed I can hear voices whispering. I raise myself softly. Mrs. Rudd has just come into the room with a basin of beef-tea, and Lady Deignton is in the act of taking it from her.

‘You need not wait,’ I hear Lady Deignton whisper. ‘I will give it to him.’

Mrs. Rudd visibly hesitates. I can see that, for some reason or other, she seems unwilling to give up the basin. Lady Deignton’s face grows dark and angry as she takes it from her.

‘Don’t you hear me, Mrs. Rudd?’ she says imperiously. ‘You can leave the room now.’

The woman turns away at once. In order to reach the door she has to take a few steps towards the bed, and in doing so, she notices that my eyes are open. She starts and looks quickly round. Lady Deignton’s back is turned to us—she seems to be looking into the beef-tea. Mrs. Rudd leans forward on tip-toe

towards me, and through the twilight I can see that her face is pale and anxious. With her hand she motions towards where Lady Deignton is standing with the beef-tea. Then she shakes her head vigorously, frowns, imitates the action of drinking, frowns and shakes her head again. I cannot fail but understand. I am not to drink the beef-tea which Lady Deignton is preparing for me. An odd feeling of sickness comes over me. I nod my head, and turn over towards the wall.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

JOHN RUDD'S LIE.

I FEIGN sleep, hoping that Lady Deignton will leave the beef-tea by my side, and go. I find, however, that she is not willing to leave my taking it to chance. She does not scruple to take me by the arm, and, as she imagines, awake me.

‘I have brought you some beef-tea,’ she says coldly. ‘Sit up and drink it.’

‘I am sleepy,’ I answer. ‘Put it down, and I will take it presently. Let me alone now.’

‘No; it will be cold. You have slept enough. Sit up and drink it.’

I look into her face, as rigid as marble, and I note that the hand which offers me the cup does not shake. Then I wonder no longer at the crime which

surely lies at this woman's door. She is worthy of a place amongst the Borgias. She is a princess amongst murderesses.

I take the basin, and lift a spoonful of the beef-tea to my mouth, taking care to spill the greater part of it. I sip it carefully, and a great feeling of relief steals through me. The beef-tea has been doctored indeed, but not with poison. There is a drug in it very well known to me, which would probably, if I drank the basinful, keep me weak and drowsy and prevent my gaining strength. But it would have no worse result. There is no death in the cup.

Suddenly the sound of voices in the garden below attracts Lady Deighton's attention. She takes a quick step towards the window, and remains there for a moment or two. I take the opportunity to empty half the contents of the basin between the bed and the wall. When she returns I hand her languidly the bowl.

'I will finish it presently,' I say, with half-closed eyes. 'Not now, I am drowsy.'

She seems to regard my apparent state with satisfaction, and presently she glides from the room, softly closing the door. I hear her talking in the room below, and then the outside latch is lifted and falls. She has gone.

Half an hour passes—an hour. At last there are steps once more upon the stairs, and Mrs. Rudd appears, bearing a tray.

'What a time you have left me alone!' I exclaim, raising myself upon my elbow. 'I have been wanting

to thank you for warning me against that beastly beef-tea.'

She looks at me oddly.

'Please don't say anything about that, sir. The basin was half empty. What did you do with the rest?'

'Given it to the boards,' I answer, pointing downwards.

'I am glad you understood me, sir,' she says. 'I knew that Lady Deignton meant to do something with it when she brought out the bottle from her pocket, and ordered me downstairs.'

'Yes, it is evident that Lady Deignton wishes to keep me here,' I remark. 'Do you know if she is making preparations to go away anywhere?'

She shakes her head.

'I cannot tell you anything. You must not ask me, sir. It is bad enough as it is, to think that I should be plotting against my own husband, even though it is for your sake, Mr. Norman. You haven't recognised me, have you, sir?'

'I do now,' I answer readily. 'You were Hannah Deans, and your father was gardener at Gorley Towers when I was a boy. Why, we've stolen your father's early strawberries together many a time.'

'It's true, sir,' she answers, wiping her eyes with her apron. 'And now they expect me to sit still and see you shot and poisoned, and the Lord knows what. I'm the most miserable woman on earth, sir. What's come to John I can't reckon up. It seems as though he were gone raving mad. Some day I shall

have to take the children and leave him, I know I shall.'

'Your husband's only fault is that he serves a bad mistress too faithfully,' I answer. 'There is a guilty secret connected with Lady Deignton which I have set myself to solve, and I will solve it. John Rudd knows all about it.'

She looks at me with a stern, hardening face.

'It is Lady Deignton who has dragged him into it, and all their wicked ways,' she says slowly. 'I hate her. John was as honest as the day before she worked round him. Curse her! I say.'

There is a moment's pause. Then she takes up the tray, and brings it to me.

'I have brought you some tea and toast, sir, and there is a chicken cooking. Can you take some tea, sir?'

'Of course I can, Mrs. Rudd,' I say, sitting up readily. 'Nothing I'd like better.'

I do not ask her any more questions for the present, for I can see that she is crying quietly at the other end of the room. But when she comes for the tray, I detain her for a moment.

'Do you know Miss Deignton?' I ask quietly.

'Yes, sir.'

'Have you seen her since I was brought here?'

'No, sir.'

'Have you heard anything about her? Tell me.'

'Yes, I will tell you, sir,' she answers, after a second's hesitation. 'I have not seen her, but John has. He has been made to tell a lie to her.'

'By Lady Deignton?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And the lie was?'

'That he had met you on Sunday afternoon hurrying along the road towards Market Deignton.'

'On Sunday afternoon?'

'Yes, sir.'

I am silent for a few minutes. Then I raise myself up in the bed.

'I have known your husband almost as long as I have known you, Hannah,' I remark.

'Yes, sir.'

'And I have always considered him to be a perfectly honest and truthful man.'

'He was, sir, indeed he was,' she sobs. 'I do not believe that he ever told a downright lie before. That is what makes him feel so badly about it.'

'He told you about it, then?'

'Yes, sir. I saw that he was in trouble, and I made him tell me.'

'And did you not ask him why he should perjure himself at Lady Deignton's bidding? What right has she to make a liar of an honest man?'

'I have asked him, sir; I have threatened even to leave him; and I have told him what I think of her.'

'And what did he say? Did he contradict you?'

'No; he only shakes his head. "Hannah," he said, "you are talking in the dark. There is something behind it all which you cannot know. Be silent,

and leave me to do my duty. I must do it, even though it drag me down into hell.”’

‘And you think, Hannah, that he really imagined it his duty to become a liar, and the tool of such a woman as Lady Deighton?’

‘Yes, sir, I do. God help him!’

I am silent. She is about to leave the room, but I stop her.

‘Hannah, will you send a message from me to Miss Deighton?’

‘No, sir.’

‘You won’t help me at all, then?’

‘No more than I am doing, sir. I am a miserable woman, but I dare not help anyone against my own husband, misguided though he may be.’

‘You are helping me as it is,’ I remind her.

‘In a different way, sir. I cannot take any message from you to Miss Deighton.’

I do not ask her again. She leaves me alone, and soon I fall asleep.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ESCAPE.

WHEN I awake it is broad daylight, and Mrs. Rudd is standing by my side with a tray. I sit up in bed and gaze at her blankly.

‘I was obliged to wake you, sir,’ she says apolo-

getically. 'John will be home in an hour, and I wanted you to have some breakfast. How do you feel this morning, sir?'

'Better,' I answer blithely—'much better. Give me the tray, Mrs. Rudd; I am hungry.'

She arranges the pillows, and pours out the coffee. For awhile I am too hungry to talk. I eat both the eggs she has brought, and a good deal of home-made bread and butter. Then, seeing her looking anxiously out of the window, I hand her the tray, and declare my meal at an end.

As soon as I am alone I make a careful trial of my strength. I am more than satisfied with the result. I can move my wounded arm, and I can walk with ease. The only thing now remaining is to decide upon the best time for leaving the place and making my escape.

Mrs. Rudd comes up again presently, bearing a pitcher of cold water. She is leaving the room without saying a word to me or even looking in my direction, but I stop her.

'Mrs. Rudd.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Has John come home yet?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Where is he?'

'Asleep, sir.'

'Asleep?'

'Yes, sir. He has been out all night. He is out every night.'

'Ah, I see. And about what time does he go?'

'About five in the evening, sir. Do you feel any stronger to-day, sir?'

'Strong enough for anything, thanks to you, Hannah.'

'I'm fearsome whether I've done right, sir.'

'You need not be, Hannah. There can be no question about it. Tell me, do you know whether Lady Deignton will be here to-day?'

'I don't know for certain, sir. I think so.'

'Have you any idea what time?'

She shakes her head.

'There's no telling, sir. She's been here at all times of the day and night. She often goes down to the White House about dusk, and she might call on the way.'

'Down to the White House!' I repeat. 'To see Mr. Stephen Callender?'

'I suppose so, sir.'

'By-the-by, Hannah, do you know Mr. Stephen Callender?'

'I've only seen him once, sir. He walked as far as here one day last summer, and came in and rested for awhile. I'm not sure that I should know him again.'

'He's a great invalid, isn't he?'

'Yes, sir. They say that Lady Deignton is very kind to him. I don't know, I'm sure.'

'She seems to have a fancy for invalids,' I remark grimly.

Her hand is upon the latch, but I stop her.

'Hannah, if I should go away without saying

good-bye, you won't think it unkind of me, will you ?'

'No, sir, only——'

'Only what, Hannah?'

'When you do go, let it be at dusk ; and go right through the woods and into the Market Deighton road as quickly as you can.'

'Very well, Hannah ; I shall take care of myself. I have had warning enough here,' I add, touching my arm lightly.

The day passes to me intolerably slowly. Towards afternoon the wind rises, and from my bed I can see the tree-tops bending and swaying, and the leaves flying in little showers past the window. The sky as yet is clear, but there are great piles of clouds gathering westwards, forming a gorgeous foundation to a fiery sunset.

At last I hear the latch of the outer door lifted, and immediately afterwards the sound for which I have been listening—Lady Deighton's clear voice.

'Close the door quickly, Mrs. Rudd,' I hear her say. 'The wind is enough to blow one away.'

'Yes, your ladyship.' It is John Rudd's deep bass voice which answers. He closes the door, and there is a moment's silence.

'Where is Hannah?' Lady Deighton asks.

'She has gone in to Market Deighton, your ladyship, to see her brother. I expect her home directly.'

'Ah ! And how is our—patient ?'

'About the same, I believe, your ladyship. Hannah

says that he has not attempted to move from his bed all day. Will you go up and see him?’

She hesitates, and, to my relief, makes no movement upstairs. ‘I am rather late this evening, Rudd, and I have a good deal to do. I don’t think I want to see him. He is safe enough up there. After to-night, if all goes well, it will not matter so much.’

‘I shall thank God, your ladyship, when to-night’s work is over,’ John Rudd answers.

I catch the echo of a faint mocking laugh from Lady Deignton, and then suddenly their voices are lowered. Despite all my efforts, I can hear no more. Only I gather that Lady Deignton is telling him news which he seems to accept with relief. Then there is the rustling of her dress upon the stone floor, and the click of the latch as she prepares to go. Her last words are spoken in a louder tone, and by keen listening I am able to follow them.

‘You have been a faithful servant, John Rudd. After to-night you need be servant to no one any longer unless you choose.’

‘I thank your ladyship,’ he answers gravely. ‘I only hope that what I have done has been for the best. I hope so.’

The door is closed upon her at last, and very soon afterwards Hannah returns. I have a shrewd suspicion that she must have been waiting somewhere close by to see Lady Deignton go. I hear her husband talking to her for a few minutes, and then he too goes; and I see him, with his gun upon his shoulder, walking up the meadow towards the wood

gate. While I am watching him Hannah enters with a tray.

'I have brought you your tea, sir,' she says, setting it down.

I thank her, and drink it thoughtfully. I am undecided whether to tell her that I have made up my mind to leave the place or not.

'You have been out, Hannah?' I remark, as I hand back the empty tray to her.

'Yes, sir. I went out to avoid telling Lady Deignton a pack of untruths about you. It was a poor shift. Now I've something to tell you, sir. But, first of all, do you feel quite strong?'

'Perfectly, Hannah. I can move my arm, and I can walk. I have been wondering whether I shall not go away to-night.'

'Mr. Norman.'

'Yes, Hannah.'

'I met someone in the wood, sir.'

'Who was it? Not—not Miss Deignton?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Did you speak to her? Did you tell her about me? What did she say?'

'I spoke to her, sir, but not about you. I dared not do that.'

'Well, what did you speak to her about? Tell me, Hannah.'

'I found out where she was going, sir. She was going to evensong at the church, and she will be out in three quarters of an hour. If you really feel strong enough——'

I throw off the bedclothes, and spring out. I have already prepared for a hasty departure by dressing, all except my coat and collar.

‘I am glad you are going, sir,’ she says. ‘Everybody is out of the way now. Remember to keep to the lower road through the wood. If you do that you are certain not to meet John, and it will take you straight to the church.’

‘I will remember, Hannah,’ I say, holding out both my hands. ‘Good-bye. You will hear from me, and some day I shall hope to repay you for all your goodness to me, if I can.’

She takes my hand and smiles in a friendly manner.

‘Thank you, sir ; and there is one thing more.’

‘Well.’

‘If you should be stopped by John to-night, or any other night, you need not fear his gun. I change the cartridge for an old one every night before he goes out. I am not going to have him shoot anyone, if I can help it, to oblige Lady Deignton.’

I laugh at her heartily, and once more wish her good-night. I do not dream, as I hurry up the meadow, keeping in the shadow of the gray stone wall, that, armed or unarmed, John Rudd will not have the power to do harm to anyone to-night.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ON THE THRESHOLD.

ONCE more I stand on the borders of the grove and watch her cross the meadow towards me. Before, I have seen her in daylight and sunshine; now, the gathering dusk is deepened by the dark, low-flying clouds driven across the sky by a wild west wind. Above my head the tree-tops bend, and the leaves come down in showers. The noise of the wind and the creaking of the pine-boughs fills the wood, and I have listened to it during my swift walk here with a certain exultation and uplifting of spirit. This is no time for soft breezes and gentle sunshine. To-night, though I carry my life in my hand, I am going to fight my way out of this dark miasma of mystery. I am weary of scheming, and wondering, and plotting. I know now where to strike, and no power on earth shall hold back my arm another hour. If Katherine bids me wait, I will point to my wounded arm. There is more danger in delay than in prompt and decisive action.

Nearer and nearer she comes, and faster and faster beats my heart. Her eyes are downcast, and it is the sound of my voice which first tells her of my presence.

‘Katherine!’ I cry, holding out my shaking hand.
‘Thank God!’

I would not willingly be without my memories of that moment, nay, I would not part with them for

any treasure that the world could yield, or man's invention suggest. She stands quite still, and looks at me for a brief while with dilated eyes, as though I were indeed a ghost who had stepped across her path, and she feared me. But the touch of my hands, the joy in my eager tone, are wholly human. She can have no longer any doubt of me. Nor has she. I see the colour rush into her pale cheeks, hollower, it seems to me, than when I saw them last, and I see a glorious light flashing in her eyes and across her face as our hands meet, and I draw her unresistingly towards me into my arms, where she rests, without any speech passing between us. Her eyes are a little misty, but her lips have curved themselves into a deliciously satisfied smile. For a few moments the winds have ceased to roar for us, and the trees to sob and the clouds to threaten. We are not aware of the existence of anything in the world, save only our two selves.

Naturally it is Katherine who first descends to the world again, prompted a little by her reawakened surprise at my appearance. She stands a little way from me, takes off her hat, which has somehow become a trifle crushed, and, seemingly heedless of the fact that the wind is making wild sport with her hair, turns a half-grave, half-blushing face towards me.

'I think it is quite time that you began to behave like a reasonable human being, and gave me some account of yourself,' she remarks, with a futile attempt at severity.

'I have been waiting to be asked for several minutes,' I answer. 'Do you want to know everything?'

'Everything. Every single thing, if you expect to be forgiven for the fright you have given me. I want to know where you went to on Sunday afternoon, where you have been since, and what you have been doing. Also, why you have not written to me, or sent me some sort of word.'

'You shall have a faithful and detailed account of my doings,' I answer a little grimly. 'To begin with, then, you remember when we were sitting on the trunk of that tree on Sunday, before you left me, you fancied you heard someone moving near us?'

'Yes.'

'Well, you were evidently right. After you left, I went down to John Rudd's cottage and begged some lunch, and was back again waiting for you in about an hour. I was smoking, and a little drowsy—I hadn't had much sleep, you remember; but suddenly I heard that rustling again just as I was dropping off. I started up, but I was only just in time to see a woman's black dress, before there was a flash, a report, and I was shot.'

'Norman!'

I hold out my hand. 'Let me finish. When I recovered consciousness I was in John Rudd's cottage, and there I should probably have been now if it had not been for Mrs. Rudd. My wound was slight, but it had been wretchedly bandaged, and I had lost a fair quantity of blood; and there was Lady Deighton

trying to starve me and dose me with some lowering drug. I should have been there now, but Mrs. Rudd and I were old friends, and she gave me plenty to eat, and threw Lady Deighton's preparations for me out of the window. The consequence is, that to-day I am quite myself again, and your stepmother imagines that I am lying helpless upon my back. Mrs. Rudd let me out, and though she declined to bring you a message from me, she told me where you were going ; and here I am.'

Katherine has gone very pale during my narration. The rich scarlet glow has faded altogether from her face, and it seems to me unusually set and stern.

'Norman, was it Lady Deighton who shot you?'

I answer hesitatingly. I have a curious reluctance to tell her all that I suspect.

'I do not think so, Katherine,' I answer. 'My mind is too clouded to recall really whose face it was that I seem to associate with that moving figure. I have an idea, but I scarcely dare trust to it. After all, it may be only a phantasy. I really think I would rather——'

'Norman, you must tell me,' she interrupts. 'I will accept what you say only as a suspicion. I want to know whether it is the same as mine.'

'Well, then, it has seemed to me—sometimes since, that the face I saw for a second bending over me was the face of Olive Walsingham.'

'I suspected it.'

'You!'

'Yes. She and Lady Deighton are sharing this

secret, sharing this mad desire to keep us from the knowledge of it. I do not know why. I am weary and sick of wonderings and imaginings.'

'Then let us end them!' I cry promptly. 'Let us go to the White House. Come!'

'I am ready,' she answers firmly. 'Lead the way.'

We turn into the narrow path, and plunge into the deeper portions of the wood. There is no chance now for us to exchange another word. Above our heads the great trees are bowing their heads with a great sullen roar to the mighty wind. Twigs and fluttering leaves and small branches are dashed in our faces, and scores of rabbits leap across the path and into their holes, flying before the strange confusion. Breathless, at last we gain the broad avenue which leads to the Court, and find ourselves in a gray lurid twilight wherein every ordinary object seems to take to itself a strange and fantastic shape. I am about to cross the avenue, when Katherine's hand convulsively clutches my shoulder.

'Look!' she whispers, pointing through the gloom to the other side of the opening. I follow her finger.

Drawn up in the shadow of a great oak is a closed carriage and pair of horses. There is a single man on the box, and the blind of the window nearest to us is drawn.

'That is a carriage from the Court,' Katherine whispers. 'Perhaps we are only just in time. Come!'

We cross the avenue boldly. The man on the box looks at us with the perfectly wooden expression of

a well-bred servant. Then he touches his hat to Katherine.

'Whom are you waiting for, Miles?' she asks, pausing for a moment.

'For Mr. Callender, I believe, miss,' he answers. 'I had orders to be here at five o'clock to take Mr. Callender to the station; but I've been waiting an hour already, and we could never catch the express. You might mention it, miss, if you should be going in,' he adds, touching his hat again.

Katherine nods, and we plunge into the private path which leads to the side entrance of the White House. Just as we come in sight of the gate and the keeper's hut we both stop short. The gate stands wide open, and on the threshold is John Rudd with his gun under his right arm, and his left hand extended. Before him is a slight dark figure which we recognise with a start. Katherine clutches my hand, and draws me close to her side.

'Do you see?' she whispers. 'Do you see who it is?'

I do not answer, for I am eagerly watching the two figures. But I know quite well who it is. It is Olive Walsingham.

CHAPTER XL.

THE SECRET OF THE WHITE HOUSE.

WE stand quite still and listen, hidden behind a tall laurel shrub. It is the girl who is speaking, rapidly, passionately, and with many strange little foreign gestures. Her shrill voice reaches us even above the roar of the wind.

‘I tell you that I will, I must go in! Lady Deignton is there, and I have to see her. I have her own message: “Come to me at the White House.” You shall not stop me. You do not know your duty. Let me pass! Let me pass—*bête!*’

‘It’s no use talking, miss,’ Rudd answers firmly. ‘My orders are to let no one enter the White House grounds this way, and I shall obey them. There is the front gate. I have nothing to do with that.’

She stamps her foot in a fury.

‘You know quite well that the front gate is locked. Lady Deignton told me herself that I was to come this way. Listen,’ and she lowers her voice a little so that we cannot hear what she says; only we know that the man remains unmoved, and does not give way an inch.

‘You’re only wasting time, miss,’ he says, when at last she is silent again. ‘I shall not be able to let you pass this way, if you stay here all night.’

She stands quite still for a moment, and we catch a glimpse of her pale cheek against the dark back-

ground of Rudd's coat. Then she thrusts her hand into the bosom of her dress as though in pain, and, suddenly withdrawing it, deals him what seems to be a feeble blow with her tiny white fist on his chest. But, to our amazement, he staggers back with a stifled cry, sways for a moment backward and forward, striving with one hand to clutch hold of the girl, and with the other pressed close to his side, and then with a deeper cry of pain falls over in a heap upon the turf. The girl does not even glance towards him again. She walks swiftly along the path and across the lawn to the house.

We stand upright, and come out from behind the shrub. Katherine looks at me in horror.

'She has stabbed him,' she whispers hoarsely. 'Do you think that he is dead?'

I shake my head and hasten forward. Katherine keeps by my side. As we reach the spot where Rudd lies moaning upon the ground he opens his eyes, and makes a futile effort to raise himself. I drop on one knee and glance at the wound. To my relief, I see that it is not dangerous enough to demand any special attention. I stanch the bleeding with my handkerchief, and then spring up to my feet.

'I will come back to you, Rudd,' I say. 'Come, Katherine, there is no time to lose.'

He crawls over on to his side, and reaches for his gun. But I know of what stuff the man is made, and I have been watching for some such movement. Before his fingers can reach the trigger I have caught

it up by the barrel, and sent it spinning into the wood, where it explodes harmlessly.

‘Lie still, John Rudd,’ I say sternly, ‘unless you want to bleed to death. You have done your duty. The end of this cursed business is at hand at last.’

He makes some faint response, but we are too far away to heed it. Katherine is leading me round to the side of the house. As we turn the corner we can see Olive Walsingham peering in at the windows and trying to find an entrance.

‘There is a side-door somewhere round here, the one Lady Deighton uses,’ Katherine whispers. ‘It may not be locked.’

Almost before she has finished speaking we come to it. Not only is it unlocked, but to our surprise, it has been left a few inches open. With a little thrill of excitement we pass through it into the back of a large square hall. I close the door behind us, and we move a few steps forward. At last we have come to the final chapter in this grim series of tragedies. We are actually within the walls of the White House.

‘Courage, dear!’ I whisper, taking her hand in mine for a moment. ‘The end is——’

I break off in my speech. A door only a few feet from us on the left has been left open, and through it we can hear the sound of muffled voices.

‘Come,’ I whisper softly ; and together we push the door open and enter.

The room in which we find ourselves is empty, but the voices evidently come from an inner chamber

adjoining it, and separated only by a curtain, which is now pushed half back. Through the opening we can just catch a glimpse of a woman upon her knees before a couch. The figure on the couch we can see nothing of, save that it is the figure of a man, but the bright firelight is falling upon the disordered hair and upturned tear-stained face of the woman who kneels there. We both know who it is. We look at one another and listen, holding our breath. Soon she speaks again, with a passionate wail in her voice, choked every now and then with thick sobs :

‘Oh, listen to me ! For God’s sake listen to me ! Think what my life has been for these two years, and ask yourself whether it is just that you should do this thing. Have I no claim upon you ? Do you forget that your sufferings are my sufferings, your fate my fate ? I am weary of pleading with you for your own sake. Am I of no account ?’

A low reply comes to her from the unseen figure upon the couch. We can hear none of it ; but almost immediately she speaks again, her low, thrilling tone seeming to fill the dimly-lit chamber. Even Katherine and I feel its influence.

‘You do not think that justice has many sides. Oh, think of the nights I have sat with you here, holding your hand and soothing you to sleep, through all the grim, lonely hours of solitude and ghostly fancies, and of the days, the horrible days, of lying and plotting and scheming lest anyone should penetrate here, and discover our secret ! Never have I known what it is for one instant to be free from this

great overshadowing fear. Day by day, and night by night, it has lived with me, till the deep lines have stolen into my face and the gray hairs into my head. Do you owe me nothing for all this, my love, my dear, dear love? Is it all to be fruitless? Are we never to try that new life in some far-off country that we have spoken of and planned for? It is my life as well as yours that you will offer up. Is that justice? Is that justice to me? Am I to have no reward for all the torture and the suffering I have passed through?’

She lifts her clasped hands and throws them round the prostrate figure by her side in a wild, stormy abandonment of grief, and then in a moment a faint, dull whisper, the ghost of a voice, just reaches our ears:

‘In another world, Cora, my darling, or from another’s hand—not mine. Cannot you see that even if I yielded, even if I gave way to these sweet prayers of yours, it would be for a very short time? The bitterness of this thing has eaten its way into my heart. I should not be with you long enough to make it worth while. Don’t you know that I am very ill—nay, why should I not speak plainly?—that I am dying, Cora?’

‘No, no, no!’ she moans. ‘It is only this place that is killing you. Once away from it—far away——’

She breaks down, sobbing convulsively. I feel my own eyes moist, and there is a lump in my throat. It is hard indeed to believe that this can be Lady Deighton.

Again the figure on the couch whispers in her ear. She dries her eyes and rises slowly, carelessly drawing around her the mantle which has slipped from her shoulders. We hear the sound of one long passionate kiss and a choking sob.

‘I—I will send the carriage away, and do as you bid,’ she murmurs.

Then, before we can move, she has turned away from the couch, and, crossing the room towards us, draws aside the curtain. We all then stand face to face.

The end of it has come at last, but not as I had dreamed of and prayed for. There is nothing of the baffled conspirator in this woman’s bearing; there is not even any semblance of guilt or fear. Her face is white and strained, as though wrung with a great anguish, but in this moment of her defeat, of her supreme sorrow, she carries herself with the high dignity of a vanquished queen.

Never before have I seen her look so womanly or so beautiful. Somehow, as our eyes meet, I for my part forget all that has passed between us. I have the curious feeling that I am the culprit, and she the victim.

A bright spot of colour blazes in her cheeks as she realizes the fact of our presence. Then she retreats slowly into the room, and, leaning down, takes a white, wasted hand which is resting upon the couch. For a moment there is a glare in her eyes as she turns and faces us again, the glare of the conquered but desperate woman eager to defend the man she

loves from evil. But it passes away. Only she stays there, holding the hand tightly.

‘There is no need for me to leave you,’ she whispers softly. ‘Katherine is here.’

The man on the couch half raises himself, and clears away the rugs which have been piled over him. Lady Deighton, stooping down, passes her arm around his back, and thus supports him. The movement has brought him out of the deep shadows into such little light as there is.

‘Katherine,’ he murmurs, ‘my child!’

She gives a wild start, and clutches my arm frantically. A worn, strange-looking old man, with long but carefully-trimmed gray beard, and face ghastly pale in the green-shaded lamplight, is sitting up on the couch holding out his arms towards her. I feel her fingers close upon my wrist like a vice, and the colour flies from her cheek. I, too, am conscious of something like a sudden blindness. I put my hand to my eyes, and cover them for a moment. I have seen a ghost! Surely I have seen a ghost! Then the tension of the moment is broken by a piercing shriek from Katherine. I look again. Katherine has left my side, and is on her knees before the couch. Her arms are wound around the man’s neck, and her lips are pressed to his face.

‘Father! Father!’ she sobs. ‘My father, is it really, really you?’

Then, as one great flash of summer lightning sometimes lays bare a whole countryside, I see the truth. And Lady Deighton looks at Katherine, and from

Katherine to me, and smiles with a strange bitterness. Surely this is not our triumph, but hers.

* * * * *

For the moments which follow we have no measure of time, but after a while Katherine's broken caresses and wondering questions are checked by a low, deep voice.

'I must speak to you, Katherine, and to you, Norman. Will you——'

He does not finish the sentence, but he holds out a thin trembling hand. I step forward without hesitation, and clasp it firmly in mine. He gives a little gasp of relief.

'Norman, my boy, I have done you a sad injury. It has not been altogether of my own will or knowledge. Cora, you tell them the whole story. I am not used to seeing people, and I am a little dizzy. Tell them everything. Let them understand it all.'

Lady Deighton, still with one arm around him, turns towards us. She speaks in a rapid, even tone, almost as though she herself were in no way concerned with what she is saying. Every now and then she glances towards the figure on the couch with dim eyes. It is evident that we have ceased to be persons of any interest in her sight.

'I commence at the night of the murder,' she says, 'and I tell you at once the wretched cause of all this misery. We had a guest, a Mr. Lugard, who came to us with a letter of introduction from a friend of Sir Humphrey's. His valet was my brother.

'When Sir Humphrey met me first I was a gover-

ness in the family of an Austrian nobleman. He had known my father, who was an English gentleman of good family and position, but he knew nothing of my mother, or my sister, or my brother. I was foolishly proud, and I chose to tell him nothing of them. My mother had been an actress in her younger days, and she was now utterly disreputable. My brother had gone to the bad. My sister I knew little of. I was married to Sir Humphrey one morning at the Embassy at Vienna, and I neither told my people about him, nor him about my people.

‘I had heard nothing about any of them until that night, nor had they heard anything about me, except that I was married to an Englishman. Consequently, when I recognised my brother as Mr. Lugard’s servant, the meeting was a terrible shock to me. I talked to him for some time, and I began to feel a good deal ashamed of myself. I determined to do what I could to make amends. I would tell my husband that my brother had found me out, and ask for his assistance towards starting him afresh in life. There was one thing still which troubled me. I did not want Sir Humphrey to know that my brother had come here as a valet, so I told him to go at once to Mr. Lugard and tell him that he must leave his service that instant. He was to make his own excuse, and as Mr. Lugard was leaving on the morrow, it would be easy to keep him out of the way until then. Then I told Mason, who was a trusted servant, the whole truth, and directed that the bachelor’s room was to be given to my brother, and

that he was to be treated as my guest. I had forgotten all about Dr. Scott, and I had no idea that he was already occupying the bachelor's room; nor, it seems, had Mason, who was very unwell at the time, and in the middle of the evening went to bed ill.

'After dinner I scribbled a note for my brother, and left it in the room where I supposed he would be. It was only a line to tell him to leave his door unlocked. I had a good deal to say to him before I spoke to Sir Humphrey, and I could think of no other means.

'Sir Humphrey saw me leave the note there, followed me, and read it. You, Norman Scott, also read it, imagining it for you. You, Humphrey—and I do not blame you, dear—thought the same.

'You, Norman Scott, behaved as you should have done when you read that note and imagined what you did imagine. You left the house. When night-time came, my brother carried his bag into the room you had most unfortunately vacated, and commenced to undress. He was interrupted by my coming to him. We had scarcely been together for a moment when Sir Humphrey followed. What happened then was all over before I could find words to attempt any explanation. Francis had his arm around me and I was crying when Sir Humphrey came in. We sprang apart, and I dare say I looked guilty. At any rate, I was too frightened to say a word, and before I could collect myself it was all over. I—I——'

Lady Deighton is ghastly pale, and I am afraid she is going to faint. Sir Humphrey motions her to be silent.

‘Let me tell them, Cora. Be quiet, dear. That cursed iron club was lying upon the table—someone must have taken it down to look at it—and I struck him with all my force—I was a strong man then—across the face. God in heaven forgive me!’

He sinks back on the couch, and there is a moment’s silence. Then Lady Deighton continues. Her manner has relapsed into its former deadly calm.

‘My first words afterwards told him what he had done. He was for arousing the house. I would not let him. What followed was my device, my idea, my carrying out alone. Francis was much older than I was, clean-shaven and gray, the same height as Sir Humphrey, and not by any means unlike him. With my own hands I undressed him, and against your will, Humphrey, against your will, I forced you to take off your clothes, and help me to put them on Francis. I was careful even down to the minutest detail, and it took us more than an hour. Then we stole back to my room, through Sir Humphrey’s, and I fetched Mason, and told him all. It was getting light by that time, so Sir Humphrey hid in Mason’s room until dusk the next day.

‘Then he crossed the park, and, unseen by anyone except a crazy postman, reached the White House. Stephen Callender, an eccentric old pensioner of Sir Humphrey’s father, and a great invalid, had just left for Egypt. We gave out that he had returned

unexpectedly, finding the journey too great for him. Since then Sir Humphrey has lived here as Stephen Callender, and by some means or other we have managed to keep the real Stephen Callender from coming back. The doctor who was called in to see the murdered man at the Court had never seen Sir Humphrey, and had no suspicions. The coroner's jury were all farmers and people connected with the estate, and when it was understood that I did not wish the bandages across the head to be disturbed, not one of them suggested doing so. I must tell you that when I planned this thing and forced it upon Sir Humphrey, we both of us looked upon it only as a chance, and a very slender chance. We did not dream of succeeding so well.'

There is a deep silence, a silence of wonder, almost of awe. Then Sir Humphrey speaks.

'Katherine,' he says slowly, 'and you, Norman, you have heard the whole sickening story ; you have heard everything. But you have not heard—you will never hear, you will never understand—the heroism and the devotion with which Cora, my wife, has watched over me and nursed me and guarded me.'

He looks away from us, and takes her hands lovingly in his own, drawing her closer to him, until her head sinks upon his shoulder and remains there. Then he turns to us again, with tears dimming his eyes, and a deep tenderness in his tone.

'I am not going to try and make you understand how day by day she has kept me alive, has comforted me, and tended me. I could not. The

knowledge of it dwells in my heart as a thing to wonder at, to think of with reverence and awe. Never was a life laid down for another's as hers was for me. But you, Norman—with you it is different. You may have cause to find grave fault with her, and with me. You——'

I hold out my hands and stop him.

'I find no fault, no shadow of fault,' I cry passionately. 'She has done well and nobly.'

She looks up at me for a moment, her face stained with tears, and with her glorious hair all dishevelled. It is hard to believe that this is the tempting, beautiful woman with whom I have striven so desperately.

'I thank you,' she says simply. 'You are generous to say that, for I have not met you with fair weapons. I have stooped to falsehood and deceit, and I have played a part with you that my soul loathed. It was for his sake. That is all. I do not try to justify myself. I would do it again a thousand times over. But I want you to understand. There have been times when I have striven to make you misunderstand. You know me better now. It is the actress who has lied to you. It is the woman whose only thought has been to keep her husband from harm.'

'God bless you for it, dear!' he murmurs fervently, although no one there save I alone can know the whole significance of her words to me. 'But, Norman,' he continues, looking towards me, 'it is only during the last few days that I have realized one thing—

what your position has been all this time. Do not blame her too much for keeping this from me.'

'I do not blame her at all,' I answer; 'and from me at any rate you are safe. Had I known the truth, I should never have been here. Since I am, you must let me help. You would surely be better away from here—out of England altogether.'

He shakes his head.

'That is all over and done with,' he answers slowly. 'Only yesterday my old friend and lawyer, Robert Ames, was here. He took my depositions down to the slightest particular, and to-morrow they will be acted upon. No, no,' he continues, smiling faintly at us, for both Katherine and myself have sprung to our feet, 'my mind is irrevocably made up. There is a carriage waiting for me outside now, but I have refused to go. It is enough. What I will not do for my wife's sake, and such a wife, I shall not do for any other person. You understand?'

He ends with a little gasp, and closes his eyes. We look at one another in mute despair. As for me, my eyes are wet with tears, and there is a great choking in my throat. The day of my release has come, indeed, but the sorrow of it outmeasures the joy. I look at this frail, prematurely-aged man, who is bravely giving himself up to be the victim of a nine days' wonder, and at the woman who has pawned almost her soul to save him, and who lies now stretched upon the floor by his side in a hopeless abandonment of grief, with her arms still wound around his neck. I look at them both, and my heart

is sick and heavy. This is the cost of my freedom. Would to God that I had carried my burden into some far distant country and died there !

There is a strange, intense silence in the little chamber, a silence broken only now and then by the distress of the two women who are kneeling by the side of the couch. I am standing by myself a little apart, with my face turned away, and it is for this reason that I first am aware of a new-comer. A hand, a small, shapely hand, steals through the aperture and divides the curtain, and immediately afterwards a slim, girlish figure, with white face and dark, brilliant eyes, steps cautiously into the room. I watch her for a moment, fascinated. Then I hear what sounds like a low, wrathful cry from Lady Deignton as she rises to her feet and faces the intruder.

‘Olive,’ she cries, ‘you here ?’

‘Yes, I am here. Where is Lionel? I told you that I would see him, and I will. Where is he ?’

She moves forward with quick, feline tread, keeping her eyes fixed upon the bed. Lady Deignton watches her with horror.

‘Olive,’ she says slowly, ‘I have deceived you. Lionel is not here.’

The girl stops short. Her bosom is rising and falling quickly, and her eyes are afire.

‘What have you done with him? Tell me. If Lionel be not here, who is that man upon the couch there ?’

Sir Humphrey raises himself upon his elbow, about to speak, but Lady Deignton has anticipated him.

‘This is my husband, Sir Humphrey Deignton, Olive.’

‘But—but he was murdered!’ she gasps.

Lady Deignton shakes her head.

‘He was supposed to be,’ she answers. ‘Olive, will you let me tell you all about it to-morrow? I—I am not well now.’

The girl advances a step further forward into the room. She does not appear to have heard her sister’s last request.

‘If Sir Humphrey Deignton, your husband, was not murdered that night, who was?’ she cries. ‘The truth! I want the truth! Where is Lionel?’

‘He is dead,’ Lady Deignton answers quietly.

‘Dead!’ Olive repeats, keeping her eyes relentlessly fixed upon her sister. ‘Dead! and you—you have lied to me. I have been your tool. Is it your fault that I am not a murderess? Did you not tell me that that man,’ turning suddenly towards me, ‘was hunting Lionel down? Did you not bid me watch him—ay, even put the pistol into my hand with which I sought to take his life? Oh, my God! Was ever woman so false, so perjured as you? But I will have the truth now. Lionel is dead, you say? How did he die? Was he murdered?’

‘He was killed—accidentally.’

‘And by him?’

She is pointing to the couch. Sir Humphrey has been waiting to speak, and he answers the question himself.

‘It was I, child. It was a wretched mistake. I

did not know that Cora had a brother, and I found them together, and—and I struck him. I have suffered very much, and there is more suffering in store for me. Won't you try and forgive me ?'

He turns his haggard, gentle face pleadingly towards her. As if in answer to him, she moves slowly forward towards the couch. We all stand aside to let her pass. But the look on her face is not one of forgiveness, and I watch her movements with a curious sense of dread. Her face is like the face of one in a nightmare, set and white, and terrible in its blank inexpressiveness.

'I have been deceived,' she says slowly. 'I was told that Lionel had killed you, that he was here in hiding, and that Dr. Scott was seeking to track him down and bring him to justice. And it was all a lie ! Lionel never killed anyone. It was you—you who killed him,' she concludes, bending down.

'Alas ! yes,' he falters. 'God only knows how bitterly I suffer for it.'

Then suddenly I see her hand steal into the bosom of her dress, and, recognising the gesture, I leap forward. But I am too late. Sir Humphrey himself must have seen the blow coming, but he only closed his eyes. None of us could stop her. With a low, animal cry of rage, she has buried a small dagger in his left side.

* * * * *

He opens his eyes once, and is conscious for about a minute. He gives Katherine his left hand, and smiles at me. Then he turns to his wife with a look

of indescribable love and content. Her arms are wound around his neck, and her face pressed close to his.

‘Good-bye—all of you,’ he falters. ‘Let the girl go. This is much better. Cora, my dear, dear love, be brave! We had to part. This is better. Farewell!’

Then he says no more, but his last action is to lay Katherine’s hand in mine. And outside morning breaks behind the clouds, and a faint early sunlight steals into the chamber, glancing across the calm, white face, and wonderfully softening the deep anxious furrows. Then we three rise and look at one another, and the tears spring into my hot, dry eyes as I look upon Lady Deighton’s white hairs.

‘Where is she?’ Katherine whispers, glancing half fearfully around.

‘Gone,’ I answer. ‘It is better so. Let us pray that we may never see her again.’

Nor do we.

* * * * *

It is not long before Katherine and I kneel by another death-bed, more peaceful by far than this. For my uncle has lived to see his desire accomplished, and in the chamber of his ancestors, with his face turned seawards, and the fingers of his right hand locked in the hilt of his beloved sword, he welcomes death like a brave man, conscious of a long life of righteous deeds and Christian bravery. And Katherine and I, as we stand up in the gray morning and look through the open window across the wild,


tossing sea, turn over a chapter of our lives. For henceforth tragedy has no more a share in us. Our lives become as a smoothly-flowing river, with a strong, deep undercurrent of sweet and lasting happiness.

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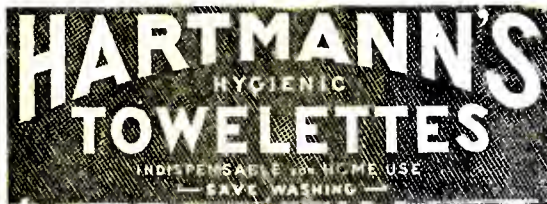
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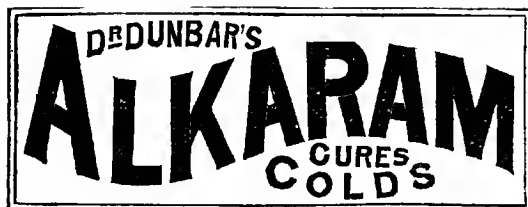
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